

PD SHORT STORIES

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Country Girl, by Renoir

STELLA GRAYLAND

By James T. McKay.

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"So Miss Brainard's father's gone, Doctor." It was the young minister's clear, hearty voice that spoke. "I feel very sorry for Miss Brainard, very sorry indeed. He has been a great care to her, and it's a release to both, no doubt; but it leaves a great void. She's very good and useful, and she has been a faithful daughter. She's very much overcome; it seems to her as if she were alone in the world."

Dr. Enfield's heart smote him. He knew Cora Brainard much better than the minister, who had not been very long in the place, but his thought of her had not been gentle of late. The picture of her in such trouble affected him with a remorseful tenderness. He turned his horse and drove to her door.

He found her alone; she had been crying, and looked tremulous and downcast, but was trim and pretty, as always. She called him Lawrence and asked him in, then nestled herself childishly in the corner of the sofa and dried her eyes. Enfield stood before her, remembering many things.

"I am very sorry, Cora," he said. "Can I do anything for you?"

He spoke low and with something like contrition.

"You're long in coming to show it," she complained. "You've been very unkind."

"I used to come quick enough and often enough," he rejoined in the subdued tone.

"Yes, and then you stayed away of a sudden, and when I asked you the reason, you laughed at me and deserted me altogether, when you knew I looked to you for advice and assistance, and had most need of them."

Her reproach stung him. The charge of unfaithfulness to a friend was one he took keenly. There was a mingled sternness and entreaty in his voice when he replied:

"Won't you let that go now? This is no time for bandying reproaches. I think I was your faithful friend for a long while. If I failed in my duty to you, I am sure I did not know it. And if I changed, it was because I thought I had been mistaken and had been going for years with my eyes shut. I thought I had been a fool and it was time----but that's of no account now. I am your friend still; let me prove it."

But she persisted in her high, child-like complaint.

"Was it my fault, then, you had not seen me, truly? I never tried to deceive you. I always put confidence in you and talked frankly to you, as I never did to any one else. And you know I've had a hard time. I was never meant for the tiresome, lonely life I've had. I never wanted to be a pattern and model of usefulness and self-forgetfulness, but they would have me so, and I couldn't go out in the streets and tell them I was not. I've had to play the part till I'm tired. I've had to walk demurely, and talk and smile to people I despised, and do all sorts of miserable things. But I never pretended to you. You knew I was not satisfied or happy. I used to tell you all my troubles and ask your advice about everything. And you know you said harsh things to me sometimes. You knew me better than any one else, and I did not think you would ever treat me so. Did you think only of what was due to yourself, and that our long friendship and the reliance you had encouraged me to place in you gave me no claim upon you?"

Her words hurt and agitated him greatly. Was she right? and had he been doubly blind? In this grieved, reproachful, petulant humor, she seemed a different being from the Cora Brainard he had had in his thought these last months; she was the little girl that the big boy, Lawrence Enfield, had protected and drawn on his sled, the maiden he had cherished in his heart for many a day; and he had been purer and braver for the thought of her. Did he owe her nothing for that? He was very sensitive to people's claims upon him. His heart bled and was afraid for her. He could not see her way. He knew she had had a hard time,--harder than people dreamed. They thought her long service and support of her invalid father were made easy by a love of duty and by exceptional ability. Enfield knew that, though she had rare tact and succeeded admirably, all sordid care and labor were extremely repugnant to her. She had said she never had anything she liked; he would have expressed it, that she never liked anything she had. He thought that a very melancholy case. That she liked the society of spirited young men, he had learned to his sorrow more than once or twice; or, at least, that they were very apt to like her; but they were all sent (or went) about their business one after another.

Enfield had a friend named Loramer, who had been one of the spirited fellows at one time, and the episode had been a severe strain upon their friendship. It was a summer vacation of Loramer's, when he made Miss Brainard's acquaintance, and he had found her bright, piquant face, and light, laughing chatter very appetizing. He met her upon riding and sailing parties, sat and walked and drove with her. Enfield avoided them both awhile, then spoke offensively to Loramer, and got scornful laughter in reply. They did not meet again for some time.

One evening Loramer brought Cora home from a drive. He lifted her out, and they stood talking there together under the trees. He made an appointment to go rowing with her the next day, and they parted, with

some show of reluctance on his part, and low laughter on hers.

He scratched a match and lighted a cigar, as he drove down the street. As he passed through the town, he saw some one going before him on the foot-path. He let his horse walk, and watched the man till he turned a corner. He turned the horse after him, overtook him, and stopped opposite and said:

"Enfield, come and ride."

He stood by a tree a minute or two, looking, then came and got in.

They rode along, each in his corner.

"Have a cigar?" said Loramer.

"No," answered Enfield.

Loramer took his own from his mouth and flung it away. He struck the horse with the whip, Enfield put his hand on the reins, and said, steadily:

"Don't do that, the mare's willing enough; she's tired."

Loramer pulled her up, and let her walk a mile or more, up among the hills; then he turned her and rattled back toward the village, and stopped before his own lodging. He asked Enfield to hold the horse and went in. In a little while he came out and put a valise in the wagon.

"What time does the night train pass?"

"12.05."

He drove to the station, gave Enfield the reins, and put the valise on the platform, then stood on the step of the wagon.

"Drive the horse to Mitchel's for me and tell him to send me his bill."

He lingered a moment, then offered his hand.

"Good-night, Lawrence!"

"Good-night!" and they held each other's hands firmly but gravely.

"Will you take a cigar now, Lawrence?"

"Yes!"

Loramer thrust his cigar-case into his hand, wheeled round and marched

into the waiting-room, holding the valise with a strong grasp, and putting his head a little on one side.

That affair was a part of the long, slow process of Enfield's alienation from Cora, but only one of many steps. He was tenacious and slow to change, and she held him by cords of memory and dependence as well as affection. But by degrees he came to see clearly that he had been wilfully blind, that he had always known but would not regard that she was not at all the girl he had enshrined. The end was but a trifle--the proverbial last straw. And though he laughed when she took him to task and felt a barbarous enjoyment in their reversed relations, and in her show of something like consternation, he more than once afterward felt the yearning of the converted heathen toward his broken gods.

Loramer and Enfield spent a week together on Cape Cod the same summer and took refuge from a storm in one of the huts provided for ship-wrecked people. Listening to the deafening roar of the wind and the surf, they spoke of Cora Brainard. Loramer congratulated Lawrence upon his freedom. And he went on:

"I don't know what there is in the little minx. All the old ladies in Elmtree think her a kind of saint, but she didn't strike me in that light. She came near making a ---- fool of me, but I can't remember anything she said, only how she laughed and her eyes sparkled."

"I can't laugh at her," Enfield answered. "She hasn't made herself and she hasn't had a good time. She doesn't know anything and doesn't care for anything. She has a wonderful tact, an eye for color, and an instinct for the current fashion in what goes for literature and art. But she has no appreciation of anything permanent and no lasting enjoyment of anything. I think that is terrible. I can't think of anything much more pitiable."

Enfield lounged against the wall; Loramer watched him awhile, listening to the storm booming without, as he lay stretched on the straw. Then he went on:

"Do you think she's a good girl, Lawrence? It wouldn't be quite safe for her to run on with some fellows as she did with me."

He caught Enfield's eye.

"No, it wasn't quite safe for her to run on so with me. She's either very innocent, or very artful, or very reckless, I don't know which. If she is good, she's very, very good."

He laughed, but Lawrence smoked soberly and silent.

"Young Harlow, the ensign, was her last capture, wasn't he?"

Enfield nodded, gravely.

"They say he was over his head, and would have given up the navy and flouted his people and everything, if she would have taken him, but she wouldn't let him sacrifice himself. That was a strange affair of theirs--being lost on a sleigh-ride and snowed up two days across the mountain. I never could understand it; both of them knew the country, and none of the rest of the party found much trouble."

"I don't know," Enfield answered, slowly. "I wasn't taking as much interest in her movements just then as I had been. I cut adrift about the time she took Harlow in tow; I suppose she thought I was jealous, and perhaps I was. I don't know how they managed it, but he left very suddenly, and she was sick about that time."

* * * * *

All these things, and many more, surged through Enfield's mind now, as he stood before her and was swayed by her unrestrained upbraiding. She said that he had stood in her way, that she had put her trust in him and given him such a near place that others had been kept from her. He found that hard to swallow. He turned from her and threw himself into an arm-chair, with his face away from her, and chewed the bitter accusation.

Finally she came slowly and stood beside him a minute or two, then said sadly, laying her hand on his arm:

"Forgive me, Lawrence, if I have said too much; I am in trouble; you will help me, will you not?"

"Yes, I will do anything I can for you," he answered. "Have you made any plans?"

She shook her head slowly.

"No; I don't know what I am to do. I can't live alone, and there's no one here I can live with. They don't know me and yet think they do, and they expect me to be always playing the character they have invented for me. I'm tired to death, and I want you to tell me what to do."

He sat with her awhile longer, then went away, and thought of her all night, and went back to her in the morning.

Loramer made him a visit soon after that. They sat up late together. When they were separating at Loramer's door, he laid his arm across Enfield's shoulder, and they looked into each other's eyes.

"Are you going to marry Cora Brainard, Lawrence?" he asked.

"Yes."

They continued to look at each other for a long breath.

"Are my eyes sound?" asked Enfield, but neither smiled.

"Yes, sound and true," answered Loramer, "but too deep for me."

The wedding came off a month later. Enfield had insisted upon Loramer standing up with him. "This must make no difference between you and me, Harry," he had said. Cora looked very pretty, and bore herself with a demure dignity which Loramer could not but admire. He got an idea of her then which he found hard to reconcile with his recollections. Enfield himself discovered an unsuspected capacity for enjoyment in her.

They came back from the wedding-journey, and she took command of his house. And as they settled into the routine of home life and occupations, Enfield began to think of carrying out certain plans which he had had in mind.

Two or three months before his return to Cora, he had met a young lady whom he had known slightly for some years, named Stella Grayland. She was not strikingly beautiful, but of very pleasing appearance, fresh, rosy, and intelligent. But the charm Enfield found in her was her manner and what it suggested. Though entirely simple, her walking, standing, sitting, speaking, were perfectly poised. In all her motions and attitudes she made you think of some smooth and balanced mechanism which, however it turned, or went, or stopped, was still in no danger of going awry. She could stand still and sit still, and to see her do either was good for the eyes. She was not fluent in speech, but when she began you might be sure she would get to the end of what she set out to say and stop when she got to the end. The simplest things took a rhythmical quality in her mouth, and clung to the memory with an agreeable tenacity.

Happy, thoughtful, modest, steadfast Stella Grayland had struck Enfield as the reverse of Cora Brainard, and he found the secret of the salient difference in the fact that Stella had had a thorough training in one direction. Her father was a musician, and his daughter had inherited his faculty and cultivated it by assiduous study at home and abroad. Coming away from her, Enfield had reflected how any ennobling pursuit broadens and deepens the whole character, as a journey up the latitudes on any side of the world gives one the main features of all, and makes the rest intelligible.

If Cora had had the guidance of some strong, wise hand to set her right at the start, and lead her along the arduous beginning of some

such path, until her feet found their strength and the growing joy of walking, and her eyes learned the delight of the ever-widening and brightening prospect!--the thought of what might have been filled him with strong regret and pity. She had only had the training of sordid care and uncongenial tasks and associations. He was estranged from her then, and had been thinking hardly of her; but when he heard of her in trouble at her father's death, the pitiful yearning swept away all unkindness, and brought him back to her side. And that night, after she had appealed to him in such an abandoned humor, she seemed to him quite the child still and fit to learn of one who understood her, and had her confidence and the right to be with her a great deal. Who was there that knew her or could help her but he? It was in no proud spirit that he had answered. He wandered under the stars, and was humble enough and lonely enough, God knew. He went back through the years, and gathered all the forgotten tenderness and trust between them. He felt again the purifying stimulus of his thought of her, and perceived how it had fostered all of him that was brave and of good report. Whether or not he had deceived himself; whether she were truly the girl he had seen or not, the fact remained that he owed her, or his thought of her, a great deal. What was truth? Are there not as many worlds as eyes that see them? Are we sure there is any world outside the eye? Does not truth consist in standing by what one's eyes report? What better proof could there be of a thing's reality than that it had held you long, shaped and lifted and led you? Cora Brainard had been the most powerful modifying circumstance of his life.

Part 2

It seemed to him that night that God had set before him a solemn trust, and that there was every reason why he should assume it. And slowly and reverently he took it up.

And now that she was his wife, he was anxious to begin the course he had determined to pursue. Cora had received the ordinary schooling of girls, but had somehow missed the true education. Her acquirements were a surface gloss merely, Enfield knew. She had never been touched by the sacred fire. She could not tell a good book from a poor one, he had said to Loramer. But he had taken her, and his heart yearned toward the companion of his choice. Yet there could be no true companionship where there was no common view or interest. It seemed to him that she had never learned the right use of her eyes, that the few and little things close to her shut out the sight of the great and innumerable company beyond, as if one reared among city streets should never see either the earth or the sky. He would teach her to use them, would show her the awe and beauty of the world. They would read together; he would find a new charm and inspiration in his loved books; she would catch his enthusiasm and insensibly learn the delight and true cultivation of all that is great and good.

He found no chance to begin for a long time. She was very busy and seemed very happy. There was the house to set in order, his friends

and hers to entertain; she was learning to ride. But by and by came winter and shut them in more alone. He got out his books and proposed their reading together, and was pleased to find she welcomed the plan. She read with a clear intonation and a careful regard for pointing and pronunciation; but somehow as he listened to her the strength and flavor of his favorite authors escaped between the words. Her idea of reading poetry seemed to be that it should sound exactly like prose. She had apparently no conception of anything like rhythm, and seemed to think it a special grace to avoid any slightest pause at the end of a line when it could be done; so that the mind was kept on a strain to catch at the rhyme and measure. He said nothing, but one night took the book himself. He read things to her that had made his heart throb and dimmed his eyes, or filled him with delightful laughter, and they wearied or puzzled her, and seemed cold and sterile to himself. He began to lose courage, but he persevered. One night he read to her in Ruskin's eloquent prose, and came to that powerful and impassioned, if somewhat mystical, interpretation of the Laureate's noble song:

"Come into the garden, Maud,
For the black bat, night, has flown,
Come into the garden, Maud,
I am here at the gate alone;
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
And the musk of the rose is blown."

He read on to the end. When he stopped he hoped she would not speak; he felt by anticipation the jar of her clear cold voice. But she did not speak. Her face was in the shadow, but he could see without turning his head that her bosom heaved and heaved. She was touched,--she understood. With a rush came a thought that the splendid song symbolized their relation. It was he who stood at the gate, alone, and called her out from "the dancers dancing in tune." He had almost wearied of calling, but she heard,--at last she heard!

"There has fallen a splendid tear
From the passion-flower at the gate.
She is coming, my dove, my dear;
She is coming, my life, my fate;
The red rose cries, 'She is near, She is near,'
And the white rose weeps, 'She is late;'
The larkspur listens, 'I hear, I hear;'
And the lily whispers, 'I wait!'"

There was silence a while in the room; then he moved very gently and looked in her face. There was a smile on her lips, and her eyes were closed. She was asleep.

He left her there and went out. It was cold and still; the stars glittered, the earth was white. He walked far on the frozen snow, with a feeling as hard and cold as the bitter air. Some impish sprite

seemed to mock him with the closing strain of the song:

"She is coming, my own, my sweet;
Were it ever so airy a tread,
My heart would hear her and beat,
Were it earth in an earthy bed;
My dust would hear her and beat,
Had I lain for a century dead;
Would start and tremble under her feet,
And blossom in purple and red."

All the charm had gone out of the words. Were such passionate yearnings actual, or at best more than empty delusions? He had yearned so toward her; she had been "his life, his fate." His fate, truly, but was she not rather his death? What kind of creature was it that words like those could not move? She cast a blight upon the noblest things, made him doubt and disbelieve where before he had walked with firm feet. And she was his fate; he was bound to her by his own hand. She sat there now by his table, and there she would sit and sit. The picture made his house seem a prison. He must go back there by and by. The thought of living at variance was very bitter to him, yet how could they prevent it who had nothing in common, whose instincts drew opposite ways. He was unequally yoked with an unbeliever.

The village clock recalled him from that dismal reverie. He had a call to make at the Marlakes'; the children were all three sick. Kate Marlake had been a Grayland, and her sister Stella was recently come to stay with her through that trying time. Lawrence gave one of the children a soothing potion, and said he would wait to see the effect. He went down-stairs, and Kate sent Stella to keep him company. She asked him about the children, and he explained to her the "self-limited" character of the disease and the necessity that they should grow worse before they could be better, but assured her there was no present cause for alarm. And while he thus reassured her, she was unconsciously exerting a more powerful influence upon him. Her steady, balanced carriage, her quiet, straight, brief questions, her direct glance, her strong but controlled interest, the simple grace with which she sat afterward, altogether affected him with a great tenderness, mingled with despair. Why could not Cora be like that? Was it so hard to be simple, gracious, modestly satisfied? It seemed very easy in Stella's presence. She did not say much; her words were fit and sincere, to be sure, but simple and few, and as like as not to end with a depreciating, low, lapsing laugh. But somehow she made all brave and gentle and generous things seem easy and very desirable. Lawrence looked up from his abstraction and found her watching him.

"Don't you miss your music?" he asked.

"Well," she answered, with her low laugh, "it would hardly be gracious to say I do, when Kate needs me so badly,--and hardly true to say no."

Lawrence recalled a remark of Dr. Kane's;--how when, on one of his voyages, in their ice-girt winter quarters, the whole ship's company, save himself, were prostrate below decks, and he with incredible strength and fortitude was literally doing everything, not even omitting to register regular observations of the instruments;--in the midst of that unsurpassable heroism among the polar solitudes, he felt at night a dissatisfaction with the day as having been spent to little purpose worthy of his powers.

Stella listened, and was still a moment before she answered:

"Yes, I can understand that."

That was it. She could understand. She knew what he was talking about; she knew and cared. He had always remarked her peculiarly melodious, low voice; he thought now he had never heard one so expressive. It was never either loud or faint, but exquisitely modulated, like all her motions. He could say things to her; when he began to talk to Cora, his words came back upon him as in an echoing hall, and smothered him with the sound of his own voice. Stella Grayland, sitting composedly, saying little, stirred him like noble music,--made him strong and fervid.

They talked of many things, the dark background of his thought giving a sombre undertone to his part. They came back to music.

"You enjoy it as much as ever?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she answered; "I think it grows constantly upon you. One's deficiencies become painfully clearer, and bad music seems to increase and become more of a trial. But it is a satisfaction to feel that one grows a little, taking the years together; and it is very pleasant to know that there will always be plenty to learn and enjoy."

She ended with a little sigh.

He was looking at her, but he only said:

"Yes."

Her words exactly expressed his feeling for literature. He felt as if they two had been climbing the same hill by different paths, and stood side by side for a moment looking up to the heights beyond that rose one above another,--where over the dark pine forests the glittering snow-peaks pierced the sky and the rivers of ice shone gloriously.

Kate came to tell them that Jenny was asleep, and they went up softly. Lawrence wrote out his directions for the night and came down, Stella accompanying him. At the door he paused a moment abstractedly.

"Don't you think it's a great loss for a person to miss the pleasure and appreciation of a noble art?" he asked, seriously.

She looked at him questioningly, but replied:

"Yes, it makes me very sorry sometimes; it is a great loss. But I reflect that there are a great many people who get on without it, and they seem quite contented and happy. I think those who have the advantage of the finer influences and delights should be very good and try to prevent the younger ones from growing up without caring for such things."

"Yes, that is true," he replied, and he went on with suppressed agitation: "But suppose one should grow up blind to all art and yet not contented or happy, without any true knowledge, or faith, or cultivation but the outward seeming, unsettled, unsatisfied, hungering for one knows not what, despising all that one has?"

He leaned back, and neither spoke for a moment. She turned either way with a shuddering movement.

"That would be terrible," she answered. "But do you think there are any so unfortunate?"

"Yes, there are some," he returned; "I hope indeed not many."

"And can nothing be done for them?"

"I don't know. I am afraid not."

"Oh, I think you should not say that," she continued, warmly; "their friends should not despair. It would be like saving a soul from death!"

"Thank you," he said. "Good-night!" He offered his hand, and she gave him hers frankly.

He came away softened and humbled; the night was not so hard and cold now. All that was compassionate and unselfish in him was re-enforced, and the view of his better nature confirmed. His feeling toward Cora was only gentle and pitiful.

But there was a difference between them thenceforth that he could not equalize. He saw that the novelty and excitement of her altered position were going from her and that the quiet of the early winter was growing irksome. She said nothing, but he got the feeling of having a child in the house whose playthings were worn out and whom he felt bound to entertain. It unsettled and fretted him. He was necessarily at the Marlakes' a great deal for some time, and his

admiration for Stella grew with the sight of her unwearied and skilful care of the little ones; through the most trying scenes she was steadfast, though deeply concerned; she executed his directions with exactness. She was never taken at a disadvantage; under all circumstances she was the same simple, friendly, self-respectful, admirable person. He was always the better for seeing her; however confused and wrong-sided the world might seem, at sight or sound of her all things fell into order and marched to unheard music. He did not disguise from himself that he went to see the Marlake children oftener than he would have gone to others; he knew he was glad to go there and knew the reason. He asked himself why he should not. He did not know how he should get on without this resource. His wife soon wore out his better feelings; sometimes he was in a rage with her, sometimes affected with a great melancholy; she could not rest at home unless there were people there; she wanted to be at all meetings, fairs, parties, lectures, concerts. She would talk with most people glibly enough, catching the cue of each with wonderful adroitness and echoing each after his kind. Most people thought her charming when she cared to charm; to be confirmed in one's opinions by such pretty, vivacious eyes and lips few men would find distasteful. To Lawrence she had nothing to say. She knew that he knew that she had nothing worth saying. She resented his penetration; she resented his pity; and pity was the only light in which he found the thought of her tolerable. He had thought to show her through his eyes widening vistas of beauty and grandeur; and instead he caught glimpses through hers of awful heights and depths of vacancy, peopled only by thinly veiled phantoms of darkness and horror. But she could not look with his eyes, and if she caught sight of such dismal prospects now and then she could not be expected to want to look that way; it was as if she sailed with a strong swimmer to whom she instinctively looked for help and succor when storms came, but who could do nothing in fair weather but steer the boat. A cloud or a breaking wave might remind her of tempest and dark depths full of cruel creatures, but while the sun shone and the sea was smooth she could hardly be blamed for preferring merrier company than one who was forever on the lookout for foul weather, and whose gravity and very reserve power of succor were suggestive of distasteful things.

They came to no open rupture; what was there to say? His prevailing mood toward her was compassion as for a lost soul. But many times that mood broke down by its own weight. Her light, child-like laugh, her high, clear voice talking so glibly and cheerily to people whom, as like as not, he knew she despised, came to him with a hollow, heartless ring that was maddening. He could not study; he could think of nothing worthy. He would rush away from the sound that he was frightened to perceive was becoming hateful. And the unconscious influence of Stella was always a steadying and restoring one. He believed he should never have married Cora but for the stimulus to his compassion that he got from her. He did not know what he should do now but for her stimulus of his forbearance, his tenderness, his

whole better nature. But the children got well by and by, and Stella went away. Then Enfield stumbled along as best he could.

Part 3

Some time afterward Lawrence had a letter from a friend: "I have an opening here for a young surgeon of parts and character. It will be the making of some one. Can you send me the name of some young fellow you can recommend?"

Now, Lawrence happened to know that Stella had a cousin, a young surgeon; in fact, she had asked him about his chance of success in that part of the country. He now invited young Winlock to come down and make him a visit with a view to recommending him. He was a handsome, lively young fellow, and Lawrence liked him from the first. He and Cora got on well together, and Lawrence found the house pleasanter than he had for a long time.

Stella came back to Elmtree two or three weeks later. Kate had felt the long strain after it was over, and had stumbled and broken down. Stella quickly perceived some things about her cousin that troubled her. One morning he came on some errand, and she detained him. He was a frank fellow, and he and Stella were good friends. She made him come and sit with her. She talked to him and watched him. He took out his watch and rose to go. She stood up before him.

"Eugene," she said, "where are you going, now?"

The tall fellow looked down at her and changed color.

"I am going to ride."

"With Mrs. Enfield?"

"Yes," he answered, doggedly.

She looked away slowly and then back, till their eyes met again. She spoke in a lower voice than usual, but steadily.

"What do you think of Mrs. Enfield?"

He did not turn away his eyes, but his face grew haggard.

"I think she's an angel," he said.

She threw herself into the chair beside her without moving her feet, and sat with her hands together in her lap, and her face bent out of his sight. He turned back, shaken and helpless. Her attitude affected him more than any words. Presently he came round and took her head between his hands.

"Don't fret about me, Stel," he said. "I'm not worth it."

She sat up straight.

"Eugene, you must go away."

He turned away his head.

"I can't," he said.

She stood up.

"Come here a moment."

She led him to Kate's sick-room.

"Awake, Katy? You slept nicely. You feel better now. Here's Eugene come to see you. I have got to go out, and Lizzie's busy, so Eugene will sit in the next room and call her if you want anything. Good-by, dear!"

She was gone before he could say a word. In fifteen minutes she was in Dr. Enfield's parlor. A riding whip and hat lay on a table. She walked from them to the back of the room. Cora came down in her habit. She had a cheerful greeting on her lips, and advanced toward Stella, but stopped half way; and Stella backed a step.

"Will you take a seat, Miss Grayland?" Cora said, with cold politeness.

"No," she answered, only half conscious of her words, a burning shame and aversion enveloping her like a cloud and shutting out sight and sound. "I have come to tell you that my cousin is not going to ride--and--"

Cora was staring with a horrified expression past Stella's head. She interrupted:

"That will do, Miss Grayland. Lawrence, you had better come in."

Stella turned. The door behind her into Lawrence's office stood open; he had come in unheard, and was leaning against the door-post, white in the face. Stella was startled, but she only bowed distantly and came out of the house. This was not altogether new to Lawrence; he had felt vaguely fearful before. Cora turned her back to him and looked out of the window; the prospect was sunny and bright with spring's promise, but it did not look so to her. He came forward and stood beside her.

"So you are at the old game again," he said. "What do you suppose will

be the end if you keep on?"

She answered without turning or lifting her head, and in a hard bitter voice:

"You are both jealous. And it does not become you who wore such a long face because she went away. I suppose you can see now that she cares more for some one else."

She caught sight of his face, and would have slipped past him, but he stood before her. Then she was afraid. He was afraid of himself; he had to keep back his hands from taking hold of her.

"Do not ever speak to me like that again," he said, slowly, after a little. "You are not fit--" but he broke off, and left her abruptly.

* * * * *

Stella sent Eugene away the same evening. After that she avoided Lawrence; there was something abhorrent to all her instincts in meeting him now with that repulsive understanding between them. And, for his part, that detestable suggestion of Cora's put upon Enfield a kindred restraint and at the same time gave him the key to Stella's feeling, so that her influence upon him was rather strengthened than otherwise by the reserve which came between them.

Enfield wrote to his medical friend soon afterward, recommending young Winlock to his favorable notice; and in due time an arrangement was made to the young surgeon's advantage. When Stella knew that the affair was pleasantly completed, she took the first opportunity to thank Enfield frankly and warmly. And the warmth he brought away from the brief interview was one that helped him to be gentle and forbearing at home and altogether true; and it did not cease to help him when Kate Marlake got up again and he saw Stella less and less often, nor even when, by and by, she went away South again.

Months passed by and made a heavy drain on all his resources. He found life hard to endure. One day, when it seemed quite intolerable and he was casting vainly about, his heart went out to his old friend Loramer. He went to see him. The grip and smile of the fellow warmed him like wine. They spent the day together. He brought Loramer home with him. They sat, walked, rode, talked together by day and by night, and were happy. They said nothing about Cora, but thought many things. The little that Loramer saw of her, he chaffed and made merry. One day, looking for Lawrence, he found him out, and Cora alone. She bade him come and sit down, and began a chat, but he would only laugh and answer quizzingly, working cat's cradles with her worsted and big needles. She grew silent under his banter, eying him furtively and stitching away with her head bent. After a while he held a comical figure before her face. She could not help joining in his laugh, but

she stopped short, and began to sob and cry. She stood up, letting her work go where it would.

"You've no business to laugh at me, Harry Loramer," she complained. "You and Lawrence are chatting and laughing all day and all night, and have no more regard for my feelings than if I were wood or stone."

She hid her face, and went out sobbing. Loramer laughed less after that. Lawrence had to take a long ride, and Loramer proposed they should all go together. He and Cora rode on a little way while Lawrence made his call. They rode together every day after that, but Lawrence could not always be one of the party.

Naturally, Lawrence and Loramer found less to talk about, and sat less together. When his time came, Lawrence did not press Loramer to stay, but he did not go. Three days later Lawrence came home and met Loramer coming out of the house. Their greeting was brief and cold. Lawrence went in and found Cora.

He could not speak at first.

"What deviltry are you at now?" he demanded.

She tried to pass out, but he took hold of her by the shoulders, and made her hear.

"Listen to me," he said. "Do you know what you are doing? If you have no shame or pity, have you no fear? Don't try me too far, I tell you it's not safe."

His grasp hurt her cruelly, but she kept her head away, and made no sound.

Two hours later, Lawrence came home again and found no one in his house. He had a call to make to the west. Three miles out he turned into a bridle-path that led up to a height. Presently he came in sight of the top. The shadows were thick about him, but above the sunset flushed splendidly. On the crest sat two riders, close together. He bowed his head and rode away.

"Harry, you are a coward!" Cora was saying. "Oh, I wish I were a man!" She raised her arm with a passionate gesture. "We loved each other from the first, and he drove you away. I never cared for him; I had to marry him. And I tell you we live in misery. We are nothing but a torment to each other. And you do not know him. He is in love with another woman, and he is cruel. Look here!"

She threw back her mantle and slid her supple shoulder out of her dress.

"Those are the marks of his fingers!"

His gaze was bent upon her, his eyes seemed drawn beyond his control; he trembled, and caught his breath. But he broke the spell. He sat up. He found his voice, thick and low:

"Don't tempt me. I am his friend; you are his wife."

She looked to right and left, then turned and took hold of his arm.

"Listen to me!" she commanded. "Bend down your head,--lower, lower!" She looked in his face intently; she put her own close and said, "I am not his wife!"

A dumb, incredulous stare was his reply. He frowned and shook his head.

"You don't believe me?" she cried. "Come home, I will show you."

She turned her horse, struck him with the whip, and plunged recklessly down the steep path. He could not overtake her till she reined up and walked through the village street.

"Go into the parlor," she said, "and wait till I come."

She ran up-stairs. She asked for Lawrence. He was out,--would not be back till eight. She looked at her watch. Not quite seven. From a locked drawer she took a locked jewel-box and from under the lining a written paper with a printed slip pinned to it.

She came down and into the parlor with her hand in her pocket, walked up to Loramer where he stood before the fire, gave him the paper, and sat down to watch him. It was a certificate of marriage between Cora Brainard and Clarence A. Harlow, dated three years back, and signed by an eccentric clergyman, across the mountain. A feeling of sickness came over Loramer.

"Then you are Harlow's wife," he said.

"No, I am no man's wife," she answered, impatiently. "Read on; read the newspaper slip."

He read: "On board U. S. S. 'Tuscaloosa,' off Cherbourg, Oct. 20th, Ensign Clarence A. Harlow, aged twenty-four, by the bursting of a gun."

As Loramer lifted his eyes the door opened and Lawrence came in. Cora uttered a low cry and reached for the paper, but Lawrence's look frightened her so that she fell back into her chair. He kept his eyes upon her, but went toward Loramer and reached out a cigar-case which

he brought in his hand.

"Here's your cigar-case," he said. "You'd better take it back."

Loramer swore at the case, and flung it into the fire.

"Look here!" he cried. "Read that." He thrust it before his face. "Go on! Do you see? She was his wife when she married you. You're a free man!"

A brutal exultation seized Lawrence. He shouted and laughed,--"Ha ha, ha ha ha! She's made fools of us both. You can have her, Harry, and welcome. I wish you joy. Ha ha, ha ha ha! She's the devil! she's the devil!"

Loramer answered with harsh and scornful hilarity. Neither took any other notice of her sitting there, sunken together, crushed, hiding her face with her hands. Loramer turned away and ran tramping up the stairs, crammed his things into his valise, and came tramping down. Lawrence was backed against the post at the stair-foot. Loramer grasped his arm in passing. "By-bye! Come and see us," he called. He went out and banged the door, and they heard his hoarse laughter far down the quiet street.

To Cora that laughter sounded like the knell at the end of all things. She sat as they had left her, and did not move for a long while after Lawrence too had gone out.

Lawrence's mirthful humor passed very quickly. He grew full of a most delectable sense of freedom. It seemed as if a suffocating network had been tightening about his heart and, now that it had burst, the joy of the great and unexpected deliverance was more than his breast could hold. He could not breathe in-doors,--he wanted all the air he could get on the windy hills.

He had been true; he had been true, he cried out to himself--in thought and deed he had been true! He tried to think: he could not think nor reason. A flood that he had never acknowledged, that he had hardly suspected, that he had set all his faculties to dam up and wall over, had been suddenly let loose and overwhelmed him. He could see no law or order in the world but in one place; to that place he must go, for light, for understanding!

And his heart, like a bird set free,
That tarries not early or late,
But flies, over land, over sea,
Straight, straight to its home, to its mate!

All the night seemed to break out and sing. All the world yearned one way; the stars leaned out of their courses and looked, not at him,

but south; the north wind went by him, crooning, hurrying, and the moon sailed southward past the ragged clouds. All his soul went out with them, and his body sickened to follow.

He came home and changed his dress. It was late. He lighted no lamp; the ghostly moonlight streamed through the window, and a figure as still and ghost-like stood at the door.

"Lawrence! Lawrence!" she called, despairingly. But he did not seem to hear. He felt no hardness toward her; she had brought him the great deliverance as well as the grievous bondage. But he could no more heed her now than turn back if he were drawn by unbridled horses and some one cried behind. But when at last he came to go out, he almost stumbled upon her lying across the door. He stooped and picked her up; she was as cold as stone. She clung about his neck. The tempest had come; her ship was a wreck, the dark waves tumbling about her and dashing her with their salt spray. She clung to the strong swimmer she had flouted when winds were sweet, but was afraid she came too late.

"I could not help it; he deserted me basely. Oh, Lawrence, do not cast me off!" she implored. "Do not go away. Pity me; I am very miserable. I should not have done that if you had not forsaken me. No one ever helped me but you, and I have not been happy, you know I have not. I do not know what will become of me if you put me away. I won't vex you any more; before God I will not! You have me at your mercy; will you not be merciful?"

He laid her on the bed and wrapped her up. He spoke in a deep, solemn voice:

"Be still. I cannot hear you to-night. I have been merciful. I will try to do what is right. I am going away now; wait till I come back."

He took the midnight train south. Stella was out of town. He followed her. He felt that he could not meet her before strangers with self-control, or go through formalities. He wrote a brief note at the hotel asking to see her alone. Then he shrank from the thought of meeting her with detestable things to explain, and he added:

"I should like you to know my altered position before we meet. I shrink from shocking you by a personal explanation painful to us both. Forgive me, then, for inclosing papers which will inform you."

The messenger brought back a note which showed marks of agitation:

"Please excuse me to-night. I will walk on the beach early in the morning."

As the sun came up out of the sea, and he turned away from watching the splendid vision, he saw one that affected him more. She stood a

little way off, looking intently seaward; and the morning took a new grace from the flush on her cheek and the light in her clear, calm eyes. His eyes grew dim as he looked at her. If she had felt any agitation, it was gone when she turned and waited for him to approach. She gave him her hand.

Part 4

"Is it not a beautiful morning?" she said. "Don't you think it should make us very gentle and unselfish?"

The falling cadence of her voice was more musical than the waves that babbled at her feet. They walked side by side along the sands.

"Yes," he answered, "yes. If all mornings were like this----" he broke off and looked out to sea.

They came among scattered boulders, and stood still. With diffidence she took out of his letter the paper with the printed slip attached, and gave it to him.

"You were not offended at my sending them?"

"No, I was glad you sent them. It was thoughtful of you." She spoke low and seriously. "But do I quite understand?"

She asked him several questions, modest but straightforward, with her grave eyes on his face. While he answered he was thinking, "To the pure, all things are pure."

She dropped her eyes and sighed.

"It is a dreadful story; it makes me very sad."

Then after a minute she looked up again and asked:

"What are you going to do?"

He shook with vague apprehension, and leaned sidewise on the rock.

"With her?" he asked. "I hardly know. I thought you would advise me. You cannot think I am under obligation to keep her any longer? I am not bound to her by any law."

She did not answer for a minute or look at him. When she did, there was a strong fervor in her voice:

"We are all bound; we are all under obligation to help, to guard, to seek and to save them that are lost."

She stood before him. Her face was like the face of the angel of pity,

her tones full of passionate pleading.

"Did you take her ignorantly? Have you kept her only because the law made you? I know you better. What will become of her if you cast her off? She might be worse than she is."

She turned away and shuddered. Her words pierced him the deeper because they were the same Cora had used, because they were his own smothered thoughts.

He was silent, leaning against a great rock as he stood before her, and she went on, with rising passion:

"And beware for your own sake. If you throw her off, she will draw you down with her, you and all--" she caught her breath--"all connected with you. You cannot punish her as a criminal. What could you say to justify your action? Think of the position you would stand in before the world, with your tongue tied. You could not bear it. In your heat you may think you could, but you might as well think to resist the sea. Beware lest in your haste you throw away the good you have gained. For you have gained. Your power over her is multiplied tenfold. Your freedom is your power. She must know she is in your hands now; the fences are all down. She will know she can no longer presume; her instincts of self-preservation will weigh on your side, and your forbearance be a perpetual restraint upon her. I think you have no good alternative, and that your duty is plain. Don't think I am hard; we have all our tasks that seem too heavy at times. We can't understand; 'His ways are past finding out.'"

Her voice grew tremulous, and she held her face away a minute or two, but then looked up and smiled faintly:

"'Theirs not to make reply; theirs not to reason why.' Who knows what great things you may accomplish yet?"

All his sense went with her, down in some unseen depth; but above that rolled a stream whose waves bore him past all resistance. And now the billows swept over him and were bitter in his eyes and throat. He bent backward and rested his head upon the high rock, and stretched up his arms above him. The freshness of the morning turned to ashy pallor; the land and the sea sickened with pain.

Slowly he bent forward again:

"All that is true, I have no doubt. You have clear eyes, and some day I may see it so myself. But I can't see, I can't hear that now. There is only one thing I can see or hear. I disowned it, I put it away, I crushed it down; I was faithful to the galling bond; I did my duty!"

He raised his arms again; his voice was like a cry to heaven:

"She made my love her plaything; she wore it out with base uses. She has used me despitefully; she has been the curse of my life!"

And the low answer came back steadfastly:

"Bless them that curse you; do good to them that despitefully use you! You say you have done your duty; I know you have. Cleave fast to that. Take care, lest you have not that to say by and by."

Her voice faltered; there was a look of repressed tears about her drooped eyes. She had plainly been over the first part of this path before, but she was getting on untrodden ground.

"Duty is the principal thing; there is always some sweetness sooner or later with that; but without it, the best things will turn to ashes and dust."

"I know, I know," he cried. "But I can't feel that now. I can only feel one thing; I can only care for one thing. I only know that there is but one person in all the world for me, and that duty, and reason, and heaven itself, mean nothing beside her. And it is like death to hear her say these things to me, and to know that she could not say them if she cared for me as I do for her."

He thought her as steady as the rocks, and to her the solid earth seemed to heave round her more than the unstable sea. But she steadied herself and replied:

"Ought you not to be glad if it is not so? It would not alter your duty. Would it not make it the harder for you? Would it not make your way darker than it is?"

"Glad!" he called out, despairingly. "Glad that the sun is put out in the sky; that the earth is a desert and my heart an intolerable pang; that there is no more purpose, or spring, or desire in my life! Oh, yes, I am glad, glad! You can't know what you say!"

She clasped her hands; she laid her shoulder and face against the rock; she spoke bitterly:

"Oh, do not try me so. Do you suppose there is nothing hard for me also? Yes, I know; I know!"

He bent toward her, but a horrible doubt seized him. He clasped his hands behind his head; he swung from side to side.

"For another? Not for me?" he demanded, hoarsely.

She stood unsteadily; she lifted her joined hands; her upturned face

was aflame, but she could not speak. Then her self-repression broke down. She sank upon the rock and covered her face, and wept uncontrollably. He threw himself beside her.

"Oh, is it true?" he besought her. "Can it be true?"

"Yes!--yes!" she cried, sobbing vehemently. "I tried to keep it down; I would not hear it. I tried to do right. But I can't help it now."

He turned his face up to the sky and groaned. "O God!" It was as if heaven came within his reach, and resistless hands stretched out and held him back. But it was too much. Fierce joy rushed upon him and swept away everything else. He stretched out his arms; he bowed over her; he caught her and held her fast. The sun leaped up in the sky. The waves and the winds sang together. There was a new heaven and a new earth! "O Stella!" was all he said.

She lay still; she had no strength. But soon she found faint voice:

"O Lawrence, I am so weak! You must help me to do right."

"Help you!" he cried, piteously. "Help the angels of light! O Stella, Stella! Don't trust in me. I have no goodness but yours, no right but you. I had rather the tide would rise over us here, than have to go away from you."

She sobbed, then turned her head with a long, long breath, and slowly, steadily, with weak, limp fingers began to loosen his clasp and raise herself up. He let her go. The world seemed slipping from him; the shadows of night fell about him. They sat side by side and looked at each other.

"Is there no way?" he asked.

"No,--no way but one."

She tried to stanch her tears, but they would flow.

"Don't cry, don't cry!" he besought. "I can't bear that."

"Oh, never mind," she replied. "It's a relief to cry; I am not altogether unhappy. It is very bitter at first, and chokes me."

She bowed her face a moment, then lifted it and went on, with the tears in her eyes and voice:

"No; there is only one way. Even if it were easier, I could not thrust her out, I should hate myself if I did; you yourself would despise me. If we could enter heaven by shutting the door upon her, could we be happy walking together in the golden streets? Would not the thought of

her wandering in outer darkness come in and torment us and make us afraid? I do not grudge her,--at least, at least----" Her voice faltered, but rose again. "I ought not. I do pity her with all my heart. If I should take away the only good she has, would it not turn to my curse?"

They had risen and stood on the sand. His eyes were bent upon her; her words played on him like the winds on a harp.

"Do right; do right?" he exclaimed. "Whatever you do or say is right to me."

Her head dropped. She lifted her hands; she spoke brokenly.

"Do not speak so; help me; I am weak too."

He caught her hands.

"Forgive me,--I will, I will, I know I could die for you. Can I not live and endure for your sake? Look up! look up."

She looked up and smiled through tears. He held her hands fast, she stepped upon the low rock and stood upon his level.

"Why should we mourn?" she cried. "Have we not the best things?"

Her eyes turned from him and looked out across the sea. And her thoughts went on beyond sea, and land, and sun. But he could only look at her.

And presently her eyes came back to his. They looked in each other's faces long, but did not speak.

Then slowly, slowly and bitterly they drew their eyes away and set their unwilling faces toward the north; and lingering, step by step, they came side by side along the sands again, parted, and went their allotted, divided ways.



LOVE AND BREAD

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Married*, by August Strindberg

The assistant had not thought of studying the price of wheat before he

called on the major to ask him for the hand of his daughter; but the major had studied it.

"I love her," said the assistant.

"What's your salary?" said the old man.

"Well, twelve hundred crowns, at present; but we love one another...."

"That has nothing to do with me; twelve hundred crowns is not enough."

"And then I make a little in addition to my salary, and Louisa knows that my heart...."

"Don't talk nonsense! How much in addition to your salary?"

He seized paper and pencil.

"And my feelings...."

"How much in addition to your salary?"

And he drew hieroglyphics on the blotting paper.

"Oh! We'll get on well enough, if only...."

"Are you going to answer my question or not? How much in addition to your salary? Figures! figures, my boy! Facts!"

"I do translations at ten crowns a sheet; I give French lessons, I am promised proof-correcting...."

"Promises aren't facts! Figures, my boy! Figures! Look here, now, I'll put it down. What are you translating?"

"What am I translating? I can't tell you straight off."

"You can't tell me straight off? You are engaged on a translation, you say; can't you tell me what it is? Don't talk such rubbish!"

"I am translating Guizot's History of Civilisation, twenty-five sheets."

"At ten crowns a sheet makes two hundred and fifty crowns. And then?"

"And then? How can I tell beforehand?"

"Indeed, can't you tell beforehand? But you ought to know. You seem to imagine that being married simply means living together and amusing yourselves! No, my dear boy, there will be children, and children

require feeding and clothing."

"There needn't be babies directly, if one loves _as we love_ one another."

"How the dickens do you love one another?"

"_As we love_ one another." He put his hand on his waistcoat.

"And won't there be any children if people love as you love? You must be mad! But you are a decent, respectable member of society, and therefore I'll give my consent; but make good use of the time, my boy, and increase your income, for hard times are coming. The price of wheat is rising."

The assistant grew red in the face when he heard the last words, but his joy at the old man's consent was so great that he seized his hand and kissed it. Heaven knew how happy he was! When he walked for the first time down the street with his future bride on his arm, they both radiated light; it seemed to them that the passers-by stood still and lined the road in honour of their triumphal march; and they walked along with proud eyes, squared shoulders and elastic steps.

In the evening he called at her house; they sat down in the centre of the room and read proofs; she helped him. "He's a good sort," chuckled the old man. When they had finished, he took her in his arms and said: "Now we have earned three crowns," and then he kissed her. On the following evening they went to the theatre and he took her home in a cab, and that cost twelve crowns.

Sometimes, when he ought to have given a lesson in the evening, he (is there anything a man will not do for love's sake?) cancelled his lesson and took her out for a walk instead.

But the wedding-day approached. They were very busy. They had to choose the furniture. They began with the most important purchases. Louisa had not intended to be present when he bought the bedroom furniture, but when it came to the point she went with him. They bought two beds, which were, of course, to stand side by side. The furniture had to be walnut, every single piece real walnut. And they must have spring mattresses covered with red and white striped tick, and bolsters filled with down; and two eiderdown quilts, exactly alike. Louisa chose blue, because she was very fair.

They went to the best stores. They could not do without a red hanging-lamp and a Venus made of plaster of Paris. Then they bought a dinner-service; and six dozen differently shaped glasses with cut edges; and knives and forks, grooved and engraved with their initials. And then the kitchen utensils! Mama had to accompany them to see to those.

And what a lot he had to do besides! There were bills to accept, journeys to the banks and interviews with tradespeople and artisans; a flat had to be found and curtains had to be put up. He saw to everything. Of course he had to neglect his work; but once he was married, he would soon make up for it.

They were only going to take two rooms to begin with, for they were going to be frightfully economical. And as they were only going to have two rooms, they could afford to furnish them well. He rented two rooms and a kitchen on the first floor in Government Street, for six hundred crowns. When Louisa remarked that they might just as well have taken three rooms and a kitchen on the fourth floor for five hundred crowns, he was a little embarrassed; but what did it matter if only they loved one another? Yes, of course, Louisa agreed, but couldn't they have loved one another just as well in four rooms at a lower rent, as in three at a higher? Yes, he admitted that he had been foolish, but what _did_ it matter so long as they loved one another?

The rooms were furnished. The bed-room looked like a little temple. The two beds stood side by side, like two carriages. The rays of the sun fell on the blue eiderdown quilt, the white, white sheets and the little pillow-slips which an elderly maiden aunt had embroidered with their monogram; the latter consisted of two huge letters, formed of flowers, joined together in one single embrace, and kissing here and there, wherever they touched, at the corners. The bride had her own little alcove, which was screened off by a Japanese screen. The drawing-room, which was also dining-room, study and morning-room, contained her piano, (which had cost twelve hundred crowns) his writing-table with twelve pigeon-holes, (every single piece of it real walnut) a pier-glass, armchairs; a sideboard and a dining-table. "It looks as if nice people lived here," they said, and they could not understand why people wanted a separate dining-room, which always looked so cheerless with its cane chairs.

The wedding took place on a Saturday. Sunday dawned, the first day of their married life. Oh! what a life it was! Wasn't it lovely to be married! Wasn't marriage a splendid institution! One was allowed one's own way in everything, and parents and relations came and congratulated one into the bargain.

At nine o'clock in the morning their bedroom was still dark. He wouldn't open the shutters to let in daylight, but re-lighted the red lamp which threw its bewitching light on the blue eiderdown, the white sheets, a little crumpled now, and the Venus made of plaster of Paris, who stood there rosy-red and without shame. And the red light also fell on his little wife who nestled in her pillows with a look of contrition, and yet so refreshed as if she had never slept so well in all her life. There was no traffic in the street to-day for it was Sunday, and the church-bells were calling people to the morning

service with exulting, eager voices, as if they wanted all the world to come to church and praise Him who had created men and women.

He whispered to his little bride to shut her eyes so that he might get up and order breakfast. She buried her head in the pillows, while he slipped on his dressing-gown and went behind the screen to dress.

A broad radiant path of sunlight lay on the sitting-room floor; he did not know whether it was spring or summer, autumn or winter; he only knew that it was Sunday!

His bachelor life was receding into the background like something ugly and dark; the sight of his little home stirred his heart with a faint recollection of the home of his childhood, and at the same time held out a glorious promise for the future.

How strong he felt! The future appeared to him like a mountain coming to meet him. He would breathe on it and the mountain would fall down at his feet like sand; he would fly away, far above gables and chimneys, holding his little wife in his arm.

He collected his clothes which were scattered all over the room; he found his white neck-tie hanging on a picture frame; it looked like a big white butterfly.

He went into the kitchen. How the new copper vessels sparkled, the new tin kettles shone! And all this belonged to him and to her! He called the maid who came out of her room in her petticoat. But he did not notice it, nor did he notice that her shoulders were bare. For him there was but one woman in all the world. He spoke to the girl as a father would to his daughter. He told her to go to the restaurant and order breakfast, at once, a first-rate breakfast. Porter and Burgundy! The manager knew his taste. She was to give him his regards.

He went out of the kitchen and knocked at the bed-room door.

"May I come in?"

There was a little startled scream.

"Oh, no, darling, wait a bit!"

He laid the breakfast table himself. When the breakfast was brought from the restaurant, he served it on her new breakfast set. He folded the dinner napkins according to all the rules of art. He wiped the wine-glasses, and finally took her bridal-bouquet and put it in a vase before her place.

When she emerged from her bed-room in her embroidered morning gown and stepped into the brilliant sunlight, she felt just a tiny bit faint;

he helped her into the armchair, made her drink a little liqueur out of a liqueur glass and eat a caviare sandwich.

What fun it all was! One could please oneself when one was married. What would Mama have said if she had seen her daughter drinking liqueurs at this hour of the morning!

He waited on her as if she were still his fiancée. What a breakfast they were having on the first morning after their wedding! And nobody had a right to say a word. Everything was perfectly right and proper, one could enjoy oneself with the very best of consciences, and that was the most delightful part of it all. It was not for the first time that he was eating such a breakfast, but what a difference between then and now! He had been restless and dissatisfied then; he could not bear to think of it, now. And as he drank a glass of genuine Swedish porter after the oysters, he felt the deepest contempt for all bachelors.

"How stupid of people not to get married! Such selfishness! They ought to be taxed like dogs."

"I'm sorry for those poor men who haven't the means to get married," replied his demure little wife kindly, "for I am sure, if they had the means they would all get married."

A little pang shot through the assistant's heart; for a moment he felt afraid, lest he had been a little too venturesome. All his happiness rested on the solution of a financial problem, and if, if.... Pooh! A glass of Burgundy! Now he would work! They should see!

"Game? With cranberries and cucumbers!" The young wife was a little startled, but it was really delicious.

"Lewis, darling," she put a trembling little hand on his arm, "can we afford it?"

Fortunately she said "we."

"Pooh! It doesn't matter for once! Later on we can dine on potatoes and herrings."

"Can you eat potatoes and herrings?"

"I should think so!"

"When you have been drinking more than is good for you, and expect a beefsteak after the herring?"

"Nonsense! Nothing of the kind! Your health, sweetheart! The game is excellent! So are these artichokes!"

"No, but you are mad, darling! Artichokes at this time of the year! What a bill you will have to pay!"

"Bill! Aren't they good? Don't you think that it is glorious to be alive? Oh! It's splendid, splendid!"

At six o'clock in the afternoon a carriage drove up to the front door. The young wife would have been angry if it had not been so pleasant to loll luxuriously on the soft cushions, while they were being slowly driven to the Deer Park.

"It's just like lying on a couch," whispered Lewis.

She playfully hit his fingers with her sunshade. Mutual acquaintances bowed to them from the footpath. Friends waved their hands to him as if they were saying:

"Hallo! you rascal, you have come into a fortune!"

How small the passers-by looked, how smooth the street was, how pleasant their ride on springs and cushions!

Life should always be like that.

It went on for a whole month. Balls, visits, dinners, theatres. Sometimes, of course, they remained at home. And at home it was more pleasant than anywhere else. How lovely, for instance, to carry off one's wife from her parents' house, after supper, without saying as much as "by your leave," put her into a closed carriage, slam the door, nod to her people and say: "Now we're off home, to our own four walls! And there we'll do exactly what we like!"

And then to have a little supper at home and sit over it, talking and gossiping until the small hours of the morning.

Lewis was always very sensible at home, at least in theory. One day his wife put him to the test by giving him salt salmon, potatoes boiled in milk and oatmeal soup for dinner. Oh! how he enjoyed it! He was sick of elaborate menus.

On the following Friday, when she again suggested salt salmon for dinner, Lewis came home, carrying two ptarmigans! He called to her from the threshold:

"Just imagine, Lou, a most extraordinary thing happened! A most extraordinary thing!"

"Well, what is it?"

"You'll hardly believe me when I tell you that I bought a brace of ptarmigans, bought them myself at the market for--guess!"

His little wife seemed more annoyed than curious.

"Just think! One crown the two!"

"I have bought ptarmigans at eightpence the brace; but--" she added in a more conciliatory tone, so as not to upset him altogether, "that was in a very cold winter."

"Well, but you must admit that I bought them very cheaply."

Was there anything she would not admit in order to see him happy?

She had ordered boiled groats for dinner, as an experiment. But after Lewis had eaten a ptarmigan, he regretted that he could not eat as much of the groats as he would have liked, in order to show her that he was really very fond of groats. He liked groats very much indeed--milk did not agree with him after his attack of ague. He couldn't take milk, but groats he would like to see on his table every evening, every blessed evening of his life, if only she wouldn't be angry with him.

And groats never again appeared on his table.

When they had been married for six weeks, the young wife fell ill. She suffered from headaches and sickness. It could not be anything serious, just a little cold. But this sickness? Had she eaten anything which had disagreed with her? Hadn't all the copper vessels new coatings of tin? He sent for the doctor. The doctor smiled and said it was all right.

"What was all right? Oh! Nonsense! It wasn't possible. How could it have been possible? No, surely, the bed-room paper was to blame. It must contain arsenic. Let us send a piece to the chemist's at once and have it tested."

"Entirely free from arsenic," reported the chemist.

"How strange! No arsenic in the wall papers?"

The young wife was still ill. He consulted a medical book and whispered a question in her ear. "There now! a hot bath!"

Four weeks later the midwife declared that everything was "as it should be."

"As it should be? Well, of course! Only it was somewhat premature!"

But as it could not, be helped, they were delighted. Fancy, a baby! They would be papa and mama! What should they call him? For, of course,

it would be a boy. No doubt, it would. But now she had a serious conversation with her husband! There had been no translating or proof-correcting since their marriage. And his salary alone was not sufficient.

"Yes, they had given no thought to the morrow. But, dear me, one was young only once! Now, however, there would be a change."

On the following morning the assistant called on an old schoolfriend, a registrar, to ask him to stand security for a loan.

"You see, my dear fellow, when one is about to become a father, one has to consider how to meet increasing expenses."

"Quite so, old man," answered the registrar, "therefore I have been unable to get married. But you are fortunate in having the means."

The assistant hesitated to make his request. How could he have the audacity to ask this poor bachelor to help him to provide the expenses for the coming event? This bachelor, who had not the means to found a family of his own? He could not bring himself to do it.

When he came home to dinner, his wife told him that two gentlemen had called to see him.

"What did they look like? Were they young? Did they wear eye-glasses? Then there was no doubt, they were two lieutenants, old friends of his whom he had met at Vaxholm."

"No, they couldn't have been lieutenants; they were too old for that."

"Then he knew; they were old college friends from Upsala, probably P. who was a lecturer, and O. who was a curate, now. They had come to see how their old pal was shaping as a husband."

"No, they didn't come from Upsala, they came from Stockholm."

The maid was called in and cross-examined. She thought the callers had been shabbily dressed and had carried sticks.

"Sticks! I can't make out what sort of people they can have been. Well, we'll know soon enough, as they said they would call again. But to change the subject, I happened to see a basket of hothouse strawberries at a really ridiculous price; it really is absurd! Just imagine, hothouse strawberries at one and sixpence a basket! And at this time of the year!"

"But, my darling, what is this extravagance to lead to?"

"It'll be all right. I have got an order for a translation this very day."

"But you are in debt, Lewis?"

"Trifles! Mere nothings! It'll be all right when I take up a big loan, presently."

"A loan! But that'll be a new debt!"

"True! But there'll be easy terms! Don't let's talk business now! Aren't these strawberries delicious? What? A glass of sherry with them would be tip-top. Don't you think so? Lina, run round to the stores and fetch a bottle of sherry, the best they have."

After his afternoon nap, his wife insisted on a serious conversation.

"You won't be angry, dear, will you?"

"Angry? I! Good heavens, no! Is it about household expenses?"

"Yes! We owe money at the stores! The butcher is pressing for payment; the man from the livery stables has called for his money; it's most unpleasant."

"Is that all? I shall pay them to the last farthing to-morrow. How dare they worry you about such trifles? They shall be paid to-morrow, but they shall lose a customer. Now, don't let's talk about it any more. Come out for a walk. No carriage! Well, we'll take the car to the Deer Park, it will cheer us up."

They went to the Deer Park. They asked for a private room at the restaurant, and people stared at them and whispered.

"They think we are out on a spree," he laughed. "What fun! What madness!"

But his wife did not like it.

They had a big bill to pay.

"If only we had stayed at home! We might have bought such a lot of things for the money."

Months elapsed. The great event was coming nearer and nearer. A cradle had to be bought and baby-clothes. A number of things were wanted. The young husband was out on business all day long. The price of wheat had risen. Hard times were at hand. He could get no translations, no proof-correcting. Men had become materialists. They didn't spend money on books, they bought food. What a prosaic period we were living in! Ideals were melting away, one after the other, and ptarmigans were not to be had under two crowns the brace. The livery stables would not provide carriages for nothing for the cab-proprietors had wives and

families to support, just as everybody else; at the stores cash had to be paid for goods, Oh! what realists they all were!

The great day had come at last. It was evening. He must run for the midwife. And while his wife suffered all the pangs of childbirth, he had to go down into the hall and pacify the creditors.

At last he held a daughter in his arms. His tears fell on the baby, for now he realised his responsibility, a responsibility which he was unable to shoulder. He made new resolutions. But his nerves were unstrung. He was working at a translation which he seemed unable to finish, for he had to be constantly out on business.

He rushed to his father-in-law, who was staying in town, to bring him the glad news.

"We have a little daughter!"

"Well and good," replied his father-in-law; "can you support a child?"

"Not at present; for heaven's sake, help us, father!"

"I'll tide you over your present difficulties. I can't do more. My means are only sufficient to support my own family."

The patient required chickens which he bought himself at the market, and wine at six crowns the bottle. It had to be the very best.

The midwife expected a hundred crowns.

"Why should we pay her less than others? Hasn't she just received a cheque for a hundred crowns from the captain?"

Very soon the young wife was up again. She looked like a girl, as slender as a willow, a little pale, it was true, but the pallor suited her.

The old man called and had a private conversation with his son-in-law.

"No more children, for the present," he said, "or you'll be ruined."

"What language from a father! Aren't we married! Don't we love one another? Aren't we to have a family?"

"Yes, but not until you can provide for them. It's all very fine to love one another, but you musn't forget that you have responsibilities."

His father-in-law, too, had become a materialist. Oh! what a miserable world it was! A world without ideals!

The home was undermined, but love survived, for love was strong, and the hearts of the young couple were soft. The bailiff, on the contrary, was anything but soft. Distraint was imminent, and bankruptcy threatened. Well, let them distraint then!

The father-in-law arrived with a large travelling coach to fetch his daughter and grand-child. He warned his son-in-law not to show his face at his house until he could pay his debts and make a home for his wife and child. He said nothing to his daughter, but it seemed to him that he was bringing home a girl who had been led astray. It was as if he had lent his innocent child to a casual admirer and now received her back "dishonoured." She would have preferred to stay with her husband, but he had no home to offer her.

And so the husband of one year's standing was left behind to watch the pillaging of his home, if he could call it his home, for he had paid for nothing. The two men with spectacles carted away the beds and bedclothes; the copper kettles and tin vessels; the dinner set, the chandelier and the candlesticks; everything, everything!

He was left alone in the two empty, wretched rooms! If only she had been left to him! But what should she do here, in these empty rooms? No, she was better off where she was! She was being taken care of.

Now the struggle for a livelihood began in bitter earnest. He found work at a daily paper as a proof-corrector. He had to be at the office at midnight; at three in the morning his work was done. He did not lose his berth, for bankruptcy had been avoided, but he had lost all chance of promotion.

Later on he is permitted to visit wife and child once a week, but he is never allowed to see her alone. He spends Saturday night in a tiny room, close to his father-in-law's bedroom. On Sunday morning he has to return to town, for the paper appears on Monday morning.... He says good-bye to his wife and child who are allowed to accompany him as far as the garden gate, he waves his hand to them once more from the furthest hillock, and succumbs to his wretchedness, his misery, his humiliation. And she is no less unhappy.

He has calculated that it will take him twenty years to pay his debts. And then? Even then he cannot maintain a wife and child. And his prospects? He has none! If his father-in-law should die, his wife and child would be thrown on the street; he cannot venture to look forward to the death of their only support.

Oh! How cruel it is of nature to provide food for all her creatures, leaving the children of men alone to starve! Oh! How cruel, how cruel! that life has not ptarmigans and strawberries to give to all men. How cruel! How cruel!



THE WHITE HAT

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Tales of Chinatown*, by Sax Rohmer

I

MAJOR JACK RAGSTAFF

"Hallo! Innes," said Paul Harley as his secretary entered. "Someone is making a devil of a row outside."

"This is the offender, Mr. Harley," said Innes, and handed my friend a visiting card.

Glancing at the card, Harley read aloud:

"Major J. E. P. Ragstaff, Cavalry Club."

Meanwhile a loud harsh voice, which would have been audible in a full gale, was roaring in the lobby.

"Nonsense!" I could hear the Major shouting. "Balderdash! There's more fuss than if I had asked for an interview with the Prime Minister. Piffle! Balderdash!"

Innes's smile developed into a laugh, in which Harley joined, then:

"Admit the Major," he said.

Into the study where Harley and I had been seated quietly smoking, there presently strode a very choleric Anglo-Indian. He wore a horsy check suit and white spats, and his tie closely resembled a stock. In his hand he carried a heavy malacca cane, gloves, and one of those tall, light-gray hats commonly termed white. He was below medium height, slim and wiry; his gait and the shape of his legs, his build, all proclaimed the dragoon. His complexion was purple, and the large white teeth visible beneath a bristling gray moustache added to the natural ferocity of his appearance. Standing just within the doorway:

"Mr. Paul Harley?" he shouted.

It was apparently an inquiry, but it sounded like a reprimand.

My friend, standing before the fireplace, his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth, nodded brusquely.

"I am Paul Harley," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

Major Ragstaff, glancing angrily at Innes as the latter left the study, tossed his stick and gloves on to a settee, and drawing up a chair seated himself stiffly upon it as though he were in a saddle. He stared straight at Harley, and:

"You are not the sort of person I expected, sir," he declared. "May I ask if it is your custom to keep clients dancin' on the mat and all that--on the blasted mat, sir?"

Harley suppressed a smile, and I hastily reached for my cigarette-case which I had placed upon the mantelshelf.

"I am always naturally pleased to see clients, Major Ragstaff," said Harley, "but a certain amount of routine is necessary even in civilian life. You had not advised me of your visit, and it is contrary to my custom to discuss business after five o'clock."

As Harley spoke the Major glared at him continuously, and then:

"I've seen you in India!" he roared; "damme! I've seen you in India!--and, yes! in Turkey! Ha! I've got you now sir!" He sprang to his feet. "You're the Harley who was in Constantinople in 1912."

"Quite true."

"Then I've come to the wrong shop."

"That remains to be seen, Major."

"But I was told you were a private detective, and all that."

"So I am," said Harley quietly. "In 1912 the Foreign Office was my client. I am now at the service of anyone who cares to employ me."

"Hell!" said the Major.

He seemed to be temporarily stricken speechless by the discovery that a man who had acted for the British Government should be capable of stooping to the work of a private inquiry agent. Staring all about the room with a sort of naive wonderment, he drew out a big silk handkerchief and loudly blew his nose, all the time eyeing Harley

questioningly. Replacing his handkerchief he directed his regard upon me, and:

"This is my friend, Mr. Knox," said Harley; "you may state your case before him without hesitation, unless-----"

I rose to depart, but:

"Sit down, Mr. Knox! Sit down, sir!" shouted the Major. "I have no dirty linen to wash, no skeletons in the cupboard or piffle of that kind. I simply want something explained which I am too thick-headed--too damned thick-headed, sir--to explain myself."

He resumed his seat, and taking out his wallet extracted from it a small newspaper cutting which he offered to Harley.

"Read that, Mr. Harley," he directed. "Read it aloud."

Harley read as follows:

"Before Mr. Smith, at Marlborough Street Police Court, John Edward Bampton was charged with assaulting a well-known clubman in Bond Street on Wednesday evening. It was proved by the constable who made the arrest that robbery had not been the motive of the assault, and Bampton confessed that he bore no grudge against the assailed man, indeed, that he had never seen him before. He pleaded intoxication, and the police surgeon testified that although not actually intoxicated, his breath had smelled strongly of liquor at the time of his arrest. Bampton's employers testified to a hitherto blameless character, and as the charge was not pressed the man was dismissed with a caution."

Having read the paragraph, Harley glanced at the Major with a puzzled expression.

"The point of this quite escapes me," he confessed.

"Is that so?" said Major Ragstaff. "Is that so, sir? Perhaps you will be good enough to read this."

From his wallet he took a second newspaper cutting, smaller than the first, and gummed to a sheet of club notepaper. Harley took it and read as follows:

"Mr. De Lana, a well-known member of the Stock Exchange, who met with a serious accident recently, is still in a precarious condition."

The puzzled look on Harley's face grew more acute, and the Major watched him with an expression which I can only describe as one of fierce enjoyment.

"You're thinkin' I'm a damned old fool, ain't you?" he shouted suddenly.

"Scarcely that," said Harley, smiling slightly, "but the significance of these paragraphs is not apparent, I must confess. The man Bampton would not appear to be an interesting character, and since no great damage has been done, his drunken frolic hardly comes within my sphere. Of Mr. De Lana, of the Stock Exchange, I never heard, unless he happens to be a member of the firm of De Lana and Day?"

"He's not a member of that firm, sir," shouted the Major. "He was, up to six o'clock this evenin'."

"What do you mean exactly?" inquired Harley, and the tone of his voice suggested that he was beginning to entertain doubts of the Major's sanity or sobriety; then:

"He's dead!" declared the latter. "Dead as the Begum of Bangalore! He died at six o'clock. I've just spoken to his widow on the telephone."

I suppose I must have been staring very hard at the speaker, and certainly Harley was doing so, for suddenly directing his fierce gaze toward me:

"You're completely treed, sir, and so's your friend!" shouted Major Ragstaff.

"I confess it," replied Harley quietly; "and since my time is of some little value I would suggest, without disrespect, that you explain the connection, if any, between yourself, the drunken Bampton, and Mr. De Lana, of the Stock Exchange, who died, you inform us, at six o'clock this evening as the result, presumably, of injuries received in an accident."

"That's what I'm here for!" cried Major Ragstaff. "In the first place, then, I am the party, although I saw to it that my name was kept out of print, whom the drunken lunatic assaulted."

Harley, pipe in hand, stared at the speaker perplexedly.

"Understand me," continued the Major, "I am the person--I, Jack Ragstaff--he assaulted. I was walkin' down from my quarters in Maddox Street on my way to dine at the club, same as I do every night o' my life, when this flamin' idiot sprang upon me, grabbed my hat"--he took up his white hat to illustrate what had occurred--"not this one, but one like it--pitched it on the ground and jumped on it!"

Harley was quite unable to conceal his smiles as the excited old soldier dropped his conspicuous head-gear on the floor and indulged in a vigorous pantomime designed to illustrate his statement.

"Most extraordinary," said Harley. "What did you do?"

"What did I do?" roared the Major. "I gave him a crack on the head with my cane, and I said things to him which couldn't be repeated in court. I punched him, and likewise hoofed him, but the hat was completely done in. Damn crowd collected, hearin' me swearin' and bellowin'. Police and all that; names an' addresses and all that balderdash. Man lugged away to guard-room and me turnin' up at the club with no hat. Damn ridiculous spectacle at my time of life."

"Quite so," said Harley soothingly; "I appreciate your annoyance, but I am utterly at a loss to understand why you have come here, and what all this has to do with Mr. De Lana, of the Stock Exchange."

"He fell out of the window!" shouted the Major.

"Fell out of a window?"

"Out of a window, sir, a second floor window ten yards up a side street! Pitched on his skull--marvel he wasn't killed outright!"

A faint expression of interest began to creep into Harley's glance, and:

"I understand you to mean, Major Ragstaff," he said deliberately, "that while your struggle with the drunken man was in progress Mr. De Lana fell out of a neighbouring window into the street?"

"Right!" shouted the Major. "Right, sir!"

"Do you know this Mr. De Lana?"

"Never heard of him in my life until the accident occurred. Seems to me the poor devil leaned out to see the fun and overbalanced. Felt responsible, only natural, and made inquiries. He died at six o'clock this evenin', sir."

"H'm," said Harley reflectively. "I still fail to see where I come in. From what window did he fall?"

"Window above a sort of teashop, called Cafe Dame--damn silly name. Place on a corner. Don't know name of side street."

"H'm. You don't think he was pushed out, for instance?"

"Certainly not!" shouted the Major; "he just fell out, but the point is, he's dead!"

"My dear sir," said Harley patiently, "I don't dispute that point; but what on earth do you want of me?"

"I don't know what I want!" roared the Major, beginning to walk up and down the room, "but I know I ain't satisfied, not easy in my mind, sir. I wake up of a night hearin' the poor devil's yell as he crashed on the pavement. That's all wrong. I've heard hundreds of death-yells, but"--he took up his malacca cane and beat it loudly on the table--"I haven't woke up of a night dreamin' I heard 'em again."

"In a word, you suspect foul play?"

"I don't suspect anything!" cried the other excitedly, "but someone mentioned your name to me at the club--said you could see through concrete, and all that--and here I am. There's something wrong, radically wrong. Find out what it is and send the bill to me. Then perhaps I'll be able to sleep in peace."

He paused, and again taking out the large silk handkerchief blew his nose loudly. Harley glanced at me in rather an odd way, and then:

"There will be no bill, Major Ragstaff," he said; "but if I can see any possible line of inquiry I will pursue it and report the result to you."

II

A CURIOUS OUTRAGE

"What do you make of it, Harley?" I asked. Paul Harley returned a work of reference to its shelf and stood staring absently across the study.

"Our late visitor's history does not help us much," he replied. "A somewhat distinguished army career, and so forth, and his only daughter, Sybil Margaret, married the fifth Marquis of Ireton. She is, therefore, the noted society beauty, the Marchioness of Ireton. Does this suggest anything to your mind?"

"Nothing whatever," I said blankly.

"Nor to mine," murmured Harley.

The telephone bell rang.

"Hallo!" called Harley. "Yes. That you, Wessex? Have you got the address? Good. No, I shall remember it. Many thanks. Good-bye."

He turned to me.

"I suggest, Knox," he said, "that we make our call and then proceed to dinner as arranged."

Since I was always glad of an opportunity of studying my friend's methods I immediately agreed, and ere long, leaving the lights of the two big hotels behind, our cab was gliding down the long slope which leads to Waterloo Station. Thence through crowded, slummish high-roads we made our way via Lambeth to that dismal thoroughfare, Westminster Bridge Road, with its forbidding, often windowless, houses, and its peculiar air of desolation.

The house for which we were bound was situated at no great distance from Kensington Park, and telling the cabman to wait, Harley and I walked up a narrow, paved path, mounted a flight of steps, and rang the bell beside a somewhat time-worn door, above which was an old-fashioned fanlight dimly illuminated from within.

A considerable interval elapsed before the door was opened by a marvellously untidy servant girl who had apparently been interrupted in the act of black-leading her face. Partly opening the door, she stared at us agape, pushing back wisps of hair from her eyes and with every movement daubing more of some mysterious black substance upon her countenance.

"Is Mr. Bampton in?" asked Harley.

"Yus, just come in. I'm cookin' his supper."

"Tell him that two friends of his have called on rather important business."

"All right," said the black-faced one. "What name is it?"

"No name. Just say two friends of his."

Treating us to a long, vacant stare and leaving us standing on the step, the maid (in whose hand I perceived a greasy fork) shuffled along the passage and began to mount the stairs. An unmistakable odour of frying sausages now reached my nostrils. Harley glanced at me quizzically, but said nothing until the Cinderella came stumbling downstairs again. Without returning to where we stood:

"Go up," she directed. "Second floor, front. Shut the door, one of yer."

She disappeared into gloomy depths below as Harley and I, closing the door behind us, proceeded to avail ourselves of the invitation. There was very little light on the staircase, but we managed to find our way to a poorly furnished bed-sitting-room where a small table was spread for a meal. Beside the table, in a chintz-covered arm-chair, a thick-set young man was seated smoking a cigarette and having a copy of the Daily

Telegraph upon his knees.

He was a very typical lower middle-class, nothing-in-particular young man, but there was a certain truculence indicated by his square jaw, and that sort of self-possession which sometimes accompanies physical strength was evidenced in his manner as, tossing the paper aside, he stood up.

"Good evening, Mr. Bampton," said Harley genially. "I take it"--pointing to the newspaper--"that you are looking for a new job?"

Bampton stared, a suspicion of anger in his eyes, then, meeting the amused glance of my friend, he broke into a smile very pleasing and humorous. He was a fresh-coloured young fellow with hair inclined to redness, and smiling he looked very boyish indeed.

"I have no idea who you are," he said, speaking with a faint north-country accent, "but you evidently know who I am and what has happened to me."

"Got the boot?" asked Harley confidentially.

Bampton, tossing the end of his cigarette into the grate, nodded grimly.

"You haven't told me your name," he said, "but I think I can tell you your business." He ceased smiling. "Now look here, I don't want any more publicity. If you think you are going to make a funny newspaper story out of me change your mind as quick as you like. I'll never get another job in London as it is. If you drag me any further into the limelight I'll never get another job in England."

"My dear fellow," replied Harley soothingly, at the same time extending his cigarette-case, "you misapprehend the object of my call. I am not a reporter."

"What!" said Bampton, pausing in the act of taking a cigarette, "then what the devil are you?"

"My name is Paul Harley, and I am a criminal investigator."

He spoke the words deliberately, having his eyes fixed upon the other's face; but although Bampton was palpably startled there was no trace of fear in his straightforward glance. He took a cigarette from the case, and:

"Thanks, Mr. Harley," he said. "I cannot imagine what business has brought you here."

"I have come to ask you two questions," was the reply. "Number one: Who paid you to smash Major Ragstaff's white hat? Number two: How much did

he pay you?"

To these questions I listened in amazement, and my amazement was evidently shared by Bampton. He had been in the act of lighting his cigarette, but he allowed the match to burn down nearly to his fingers and then dropped it with a muttered exclamation in the fire. Finally:

"I don't know how you found out," he said, "but you evidently know the truth. Provided you assure me that you are not out to make a silly-season newspaper story, I'll tell you all I know."

Harley laid his card on the table, and:

"Unless the ends of justice demand it," he said, "I give you my word that anything you care to say will go no further. You may speak freely before my friend, Mr. Knox. Simply tell me in as few words as possible what led you to court arrest in that manner."

"Right," replied Bampton, "I will." He half closed his eyes, reflectively. "I was having tea in the Lyons' cafe, to which I always go, last Monday afternoon about four o'clock, when a man sat down facing me and got into conversation."

"Describe him!"

"He was a man rather above medium height. I should say about my own build; dark, going gray. He had a neat moustache and a short beard, and the look of a man who had travelled a lot. His skin was very tanned, almost as deeply as yours, Mr. Harley. Not at all the sort of chap that goes in there as a rule. After a while he made an extraordinary proposal. At first I thought he was joking, then when I grasped the idea that he was serious I concluded he was mad. He asked me how much a year I earned, and I told him Peters and Peters paid me 150 pounds. He said: 'I'll give you a year's salary to knock a man's hat off!'"

As Bampton spoke the words he glanced at us with twinkling eyes, but although for my own part I was merely amused, Harley's expression had grown very stern.

"Of course, I laughed," continued Bampton, "but when the man drew out a fat wallet and counted ten five-pound notes on the table I began to think seriously about his proposal. Even supposing he was cracked, it was absolutely money for nothing.

"'Of course,' he said, 'you'll lose your job and you may be arrested, but you'll say that you had been out with a few friends and were a little excited, also that you never could stand white hats. Stick to that story and the balance of a hundred pounds will reach you on the following morning.'"

"I asked him for further particulars, and I asked him why he had picked me for the job. He replied that he had been looking for some time for the right man; a man who was strong enough physically to accomplish the thing, and someone"--Bampton's eyes twinkled again--"with a dash of the devil in him, but at the same time a man who could be relied upon to stick to his guns and not to give the game away.

"You asked me to be brief, and I'll try to be. The man in the white hat was described to me, and the exact time and place of the meeting. I just had to grab his white hat, smash it, and face the music. I agreed. I don't deny that I had a couple of stiff drinks before I set out, but the memory of that fifty pounds locked up here in my room and the further hundred promised, bucked me up wonderfully. It was impossible to mistake my man; I could see him coming toward me as I waited just outside a sort of little restaurant called the Cafe Dame. As arranged, I bumped into him, grabbed his hat and jumped on it."

He paused, raising his hand to his head reminiscently.

"My man was a bit of a scrapper," he continued, "and he played hell. I've never heard such language in my life, and the way he laid about me with his cane is something I am not likely to forget in a hurry. A crowd gathered, naturally, and (also naturally) I was 'pinched.' That didn't matter much. I got off lightly; and although I've been dismissed by Peters and Peters, twenty crisp fivers are locked in my trunk there, with the ten which I received in the City."

Harley checked him, and:

"May I see the envelope in which they arrived?" he asked.

"Sorry," replied Bampton, "but I burned it. I thought it was playing the game to do so. It wouldn't have helped you much, though," he added; "It was an ordinary common envelope, posted in the City, address typewritten, and not a line enclosed."

"Registered?"

"No."

Bampton stood looking at us with a curious expression on his face, and suddenly:

"There's one point," he said, "on which my conscience isn't easy. You know about that poor devil who fell out of a window? Well, it would never have happened if I hadn't kicked up a row in the street. There's no doubt he was leaning out to see what the disturbance was about when the accident occurred."

"Did you actually see him fall?" asked Harley.

"No. He fell from a window several yards behind me in the side street, but I heard him cry out, and as I was lugged off by the police I heard the bell of the ambulance which came to fetch him."

He paused again and stood rubbing his head ruefully.

"H'm," said Harley; "was there anything particularly remarkable about this man in the Lyons' cafe?"

Bampton reflected silently for some moments, and then:

"Nothing much," he confessed. "He was evidently a gentleman, wore a blue top-coat, a dark tweed suit, and what looked like a regimental tie, but I didn't see much of the colours. He was very tanned, as I have said, even to the backs of his hands--and oh, yes! there was one point: He had a gold-covered tooth."

"Which tooth?"

"I can't remember, except that it was on the left side, and I always noticed it when he smiled."

"Did he wear any ring or pin which you would recognize?"

"No."

"Had he any oddity of speech or voice?"

"No. Just a heavy, drawling manner. He spoke like thousands of other cultured Englishmen. But wait a minute--yes! There was one other point. Now I come to think of it, his eyes very slightly slanted upward."

Harley stared.

"Like a Chinaman's?"

"Oh, nothing so marked as that. But the same sort of formation."

Harley nodded briskly and buttoned up his overcoat.

"Thanks, Mr. Bampton," he said; "we will detain you no longer!"

As we descended the stairs, where the smell of frying sausages had given place to that of something burning--probably the sausages:

"I was half inclined to think that Major Ragstaff's ideas were traceable to a former touch of the sun," said Harley. "I begin to believe that he has put us on the track of a highly unusual crime. I am sorry to delay dinner, Knox, but I propose to call at the Cafe Dame."

III

A CRIMINAL GENIUS

On entering the doorway of the Cafe Dame we found ourselves in a narrow passage. In front of us was a carpeted stair, and to the right a glass-panelled door communicating with a discreetly lighted little dining room which seemed to be well patronized. Opening the door Harley beckoned to a waiter, and:

"I wish to see the proprietor," he said.

"Mr. Meyer is engaged at the moment, sir," was the reply.

"Where is he?"

"In his office upstairs, sir. He will be down in a moment."

The waiter hurried away, and Harley stood glancing up the stairs as if in doubt what to do.

"I cannot imagine how such a place can pay," he muttered. "The rent must be enormous in this district."

But even before he ceased speaking I became aware of an excited conversation which was taking place in some apartment above.

"It's scandalous!" I heard, in a woman's shrill voice. "You have no right to keep it! It's not your property, and I'm here to demand that you give it up."

A man's voice replied in voluble broken English, but I could only distinguish a word here and there. I saw that Harley was interested, for catching my questioning glance, he raised his finger to his lips enjoining me to be silent.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" continued the female voice. "Of course you know it's blackmail?"

A flow of unintelligible words answered this speech, then:

"I shall come back with someone," cried the invisible woman, "who will make you give it up!"

"Knox," whispered Harley in my ear, "when that woman comes down, follow her! I'm afraid you will bungle the business, and I would not ask you to attempt it if big things were not at stake. Return here; I shall wait."

As a matter of fact, his sudden request had positively astounded me, but ere I had time for any reply a door suddenly banged open above and a respectable-looking woman, who might have been some kind of upper servant, came quickly down the stairs. An expression of intense indignation rested upon her face, and without seeming to notice our presence she brushed past us and went out into the street.

"Off you go, Knox!" said Harley.

Seeing myself committed to an unpleasant business, I slipped out of the doorway and detected the woman five or six yards away hurrying in the direction of Piccadilly. I had no difficulty in following her, for she was evidently unsuspecting of my presence, and when presently she mounted a westward-bound 'bus I did likewise, but while she got inside I went on top, and occupied a seat on the near side whence I could observe anyone leaving the vehicle.

If I had not known Paul Harley so well I should have counted the whole business a ridiculous farce, but recognizing that something underlay these seemingly trivial and disconnected episodes, I lighted a cigarette and resigned myself to circumstance.

At Hyde Park Corner I saw the woman descending, and when presently she walked up Hamilton Place I was not far behind her. At the door of an imposing mansion she stopped, and in response to a ring of the bell the door was opened by a footman, and the woman hurried in. Evidently she was an inmate of the establishment; and conceiving that my duty was done when I had noted the number of the house, I retraced my steps to the corner; and, hailing a taxicab, returned to the Cafe Dame.

On inquiring of the same waiter whom Harley had accosted whether my friend was there:

"I think a gentleman is upstairs with Mr. Meyer," said the man.

"In his office?"

"Yes, sir."

Thereupon I mounted the stairs and before a half-open door paused. Harley's voice was audible within, and therefore I knocked and entered.

I discovered Harley standing by an American desk. Beside him in a revolving chair which, with the desk, constituted the principal furniture of a tiny office, sat a man in a dress-suit which had palpably not been made for him. He had a sullen and suspiciously Teutonic cast

of countenance, and he was engaged in a voluble but hardly intelligible speech as I entered.

"Ha, Knox!" said Harley, glancing over his shoulder, "did you manage?"

"Yes," I replied.

Harley nodded shortly and turned again to the man in the chair.

"I am sorry to give you so much trouble, Mr. Meyer," he said, "but I should like my friend here to see the room above."

At this moment my attention was attracted by a singular object which lay upon the desk amongst a litter of bills and accounts. This was a piece of rusty iron bar somewhat less than three feet in length, and which once had been painted green.

"You are looking at this tragic fragment, Knox," said Harley, taking up the bar. "Of course"--he shrugged his shoulders--"it explains the whole unfortunate occurrence. You see there was a flaw in the metal at this end, here"--he indicated the spot--"and the other end had evidently worn loose in its socket."

"But I don't understand."

"It will all be made clear at the inquest, no doubt. A most unfortunate thing for you, Mr. Meyer."

"Most unfortunate," declared the proprietor of the restaurant, extending his thick hands pathetically. "Most ruinous to my business."

"We will go upstairs now," said Harley. "You will kindly lead the way, Mr. Meyer, and the whole thing will be quite clear to you, Knox."

As the proprietor walked out of the office and upstairs to the second floor Harley whispered in my ear:

"Where did she go?"

"No. ---- Hamilton Place," I replied in an undertone.

"Good God!" muttered my friend, and clutched my arm so tightly that I winced. "Good God! The master touch, Knox! This crime was the work of a genius--of a genius with slightly, very slightly, oblique eyes."

Opening a door on the second landing, Mr. Meyer admitted us to a small supper-room. Its furniture consisted of a round dining table, several chairs, a couch, and very little else. I observed, however, that the furniture, carpet, and a few other appointments were of a character much more elegant than those of the public room below. A window which

overlooked the street was open, so that the plush curtains which had been drawn aside moved slightly to and fro in the draught.

"The window of the tragedy, Knox," explained Harley.

He crossed the room.

"If you will stand here beside me you will see the gap in the railing caused by the breaking away of the fragment which now lies on Mr. Meyer's desk. Some few yards to the left in the street below is where the assault took place, of which we have heard, and the unfortunate Mr. De Lana, who was dining here alone--an eccentric custom of his--naturally ran to the window upon hearing the disturbance and leaned out, supporting his weight upon the railing. The rail collapsed, and--we know the rest."

"It will ruin me," groaned Meyer; "it will give bad repute to my establishment."

"I fear it will," agreed Harley sympathetically, "unless we can manage to clear up one or two little difficulties which I have observed. For instance"--he tapped the proprietor on the shoulder confidentially--"have you any idea, any hazy idea, of the identity of the woman who was dining here with Mr. De Lana on Wednesday night?"

The effect of this simple inquiry upon the proprietor was phenomenal. His fat yellow face assumed a sort of leaden hue, and his already prominent eyes protruded abnormally. He licked his lips.

"I tell you--already I tell you," he muttered, "that Mr. De Lana he engage this room every Wednesday and sometimes also Friday, and dine here by himself."

"And I tell you," said Harley sweetly, "that you are an inspired liar. You smuggled her out by the side entrance after the accident."

"The side entrance?" muttered Meyer. "The side entrance?"

"Exactly; the side entrance. There is something else which I must ask you to tell me. Who had engaged this room on Tuesday night, the night before the accident?"

The proprietor's expression remained uncomprehending, and:

"A gentleman," he said. "I never see him before."

"Another solitary diner?" suggested Harley.

"Yes, he is alone all the evening waiting for a friend who does not arrive."

"Ah," mused Harley--"alone all the evening, was he? And his friend disappointed him. May I suggest that he was a dark man? Gray at the temples, having a dark beard and moustache, and a very tanned face? His eyes slanted slightly upward?"

"Yes! yes!" cried Meyer, and his astonishment was patently unfeigned. "It is a friend of yours?"

"A friend of mine, yes," said Harley absently, but his expression was very grim. "What time did he finally leave?"

"He waited until after eleven o'clock. The dinner is spoilt. He pays, but does not complain."

"No," said Harley musingly, "he had nothing to complain about. One more question, my friend. When the lady escaped hurriedly on Wednesday night, what was it that she left behind and what price are you trying to extort from her for returning it?"

At that the man collapsed entirely.

"Ah, Gott!" he cried, and raised his hand to his clammy forehead. "You will ruin me. I am a ruined man. I don't try to extort anything. I run an honest business-----"

"And one of the most profitable in the world," added Harley, "since the days of Thais to our own. Even at Bond Street rentals I assume that a house of assignation is a golden enterprise."

"Ah!" groaned Meyer, "I am ruined, so what does it matter? I tell you everything. I know Mr. De Lana who engages my room regularly, but I don't know who the lady is who meets him here. No! I swear it! But always it is the same lady. When he falls I am downstairs in my office, and I hear him cry out. The lady comes running from the room and begs of me to get her away without being seen and to keep all mention of her out of the matter."

"What did she pay you?" asked Harley.

"Pay me?" muttered Meyer, pulled up thus shortly in the midst of his statement.

"Pay you. Exactly. Don't argue; answer."

The man delivered himself of a guttural, choking sound, and finally:

"She promised one hundred pounds," he confessed hoarsely.

"But you surely did not accept a mere promise? Out with it. What did she

give you?"

"A ring," came the confession at last.

"A ring. I see. I will take it with me if you don't mind. And now, finally, what was it that she left behind?"

"Ah, Gott!" moaned the man, dropping into a chair and resting his arms upon the table. "It is all a great panic, you see. I hurry her out by the back stair from this landing and she forgets her bag."

"Her bag? Good."

"Then I clear away the remains of dinner so I can say Mr. De Lana is dining alone. It is as much my interest as the lady's."

"Of course! I quite understand. I will trouble you no more, Mr. Meyer, except to step into your office and to relieve you of that incriminating evidence, the lady's bag and her ring."

IV

THE SLANTING EYES

"Do you understand, Knox?" said Harley as the cab bore us toward Hamilton Place. "Do you grasp the details of this cunning scheme?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "I am hopelessly at sea."

Nevertheless, I had forgotten that I was hungry in the excitement which now claimed me. For although the thread upon which these seemingly disconnected things hung was invisible to me, I recognized that Bampton, the city clerk, the bearded stranger who had made so singular a proposition to him, the white-hatted major, the dead stockbroker, and the mysterious woman whose presence in the case the clear sight of Harley had promptly detected, all were linked together by some subtle chain. I was convinced, too, that my friend held at least one end of that chain in his grip.

"In order to prepare your mind for the interview which I hope to obtain this evening," continued Harley, "let me enlighten you upon one or two points which may seem obscure. In the first place you recognize that anyone leaning out of the window on the second floor would almost automatically rest his weight upon the iron bar which was placed there for that very purpose, since the ledge is unusually low?"

"Quite," I replied, "and it also follows that if the bar gave way anyone thus leaning on it would be pitched into the street."

"Your reasoning is correct."

"But, my dear fellow," said I, "how could such an accident have been foreseen?"

"You speak of an accident. This was no accident! One end of the bar had been filed completely through, although the file marks had been carefully concealed with rust and dirt; and the other end had been wrenched out from its socket and then replaced in such a way that anyone leaning upon the bar could not fail to be precipitated into the street!"

"Good heavens! Then you mean-----"

"I mean, Knox, that the man who occupied the supper room on the night before the tragedy--the dark man, tanned and bearded, with slightly oblique eyes---spent his time in filing through that bar--in short, in preparing a death trap!"

I was almost dumbfounded.

"But, Harley," I said, "assuming that he knew his victim would be the next occupant of the room, how could he know-----?"

I stopped. Suddenly, as if a curtain had been raised, the details of what I now perceived to be a fiendishly cunning murder were revealed to me.

"According to his own account, Knox," resumed Harley, "Major Ragstaff regularly passed along that street with military punctuality at the same hour every night. You may take it for granted that the murderer was well aware of this. As a matter of fact, I happen to know that he was. We must also take it for granted that the murderer knew of these little dinners for two which took place in the private room above the Cafe Dame every Wednesday--and sometimes on Friday. Around the figure of the methodical major--with his conspicuous white hat as a sort of focus--was built up one of the most ingenious schemes of murder with which I have ever come in contact. The victim literally killed himself."

"But, Harley, the victim might have ignored the disturbance."

"That is where I first detected the touch of genius, Knox. He recognized the voice of one of the combatants--or his companion did. Here we are."

The cab drew up before the house in Hamilton Place. We alighted, and Harley pressed the bell. The same footman whom I had seen admit the woman opened the door.

"Is Lady Ireton at home?" asked Harley.

As he uttered the name I literally held my breath. We had come to the house of Major Ragstaff's daughter, the Marchioness of Ireton, one of society's most celebrated and beautiful hostesses!--the wife of a peer famed alike as sportsman, soldier, and scholar.

"I believe she is dining at home, sir," said the man. "Shall I inquire?"

"Be good enough to do so," replied Harley, and gave him a card. "Inform her that I wish to return to her a handbag which she lost a few days ago."

The man ushered us into an anteroom opening off the lofty and rather gloomy hall, and as the door closed:

"Harley," I said in a stage whisper, "am I to believe-----"

"Can you doubt it?" returned Harley with a grim smile.

A few moments later we were shown into a charmingly intimate little boudoir in which Lady Ireton was waiting to receive us. She was a strikingly handsome brunette, but to-night her face, which normally, I think, possessed rich colouring, was almost pallid, and there was a hunted look in her dark eyes which made me wish to be anywhere rather than where I found myself. Without preamble she rose and addressed Harley:

"I fail to understand your message, sir," she said, and I admired the imperious courage with which she faced him. "You say you have recovered a handbag which I had lost?"

Harley bowed, and from the pocket of his greatcoat took out a silken-tasselled bag.

"The one which you left in the Cafe Dame, Lady Ireton," he replied. "Here also I have"--from another pocket he drew out a diamond ring--"something which was extorted from you by the fellow Meyer."

Without touching her recovered property, Lady Ireton sank slowly down into the chair from which she had arisen, her gaze fixed as if hypnotically upon the speaker.

"My friend, Mr. Knox, is aware of all the circumstances," continued the latter, "but he is as anxious as I am to terminate this painful interview. I surmise that what occurred on Wednesday night was this--(correct me if I am wrong): While dining with Mr. De Lana you heard sounds of altercation in the street below. May I suggest that you recognized one of the voices?"

Lady Ireton, still staring straight before her at Harley, inclined her head in assent.

"I heard my father's voice," she said hoarsely.

"Quite so," he continued. "I am aware that Major Ragstaff is your father." He turned to me: "Do you recognize the touch of genius at last?" Then, again addressing Lady Ireton: "You naturally suggested to your companion that he should look out of the window in order to learn what was taking place. The next thing you knew was that he had fallen into the street below?"

Lady Ireton shuddered and raised her hands to her face.

"It is retribution," she whispered. "I have brought this ruin upon myself. But he does not deserve-----"

Her voice faded into silence, and:

"You refer to your husband, Lord Ireton?" said Harley.

Lady Ireton nodded, and again recovering power of speech:

"It was to have been our last meeting," she said, looking up at Harley.

She shuddered, and her eyes blazed into sudden fierceness. Then, clenching her hands, she looked aside.

"Oh, God, the shame of this hour!" she whispered.

And I would have given much to have been spared the spectacle of this proud, erring woman's humiliation. But Paul Harley was scientifically remorseless. I could detect no pity in his glance.

"I would give my life willingly to spare my husband the knowledge of what has been," said Lady Ireton in a low, monotonous voice. "Three times I sent my maid to Meyer to recover my bag, but he demanded a price which even I could not pay. Now it is all discovered, and Harry will know."

"That, I fear, is unavoidable, Lady Ireton," declared Harley. "May I ask where Lord Ireton is at present?"

"He is in Africa after big game."

"H'm," said Harley, "in Africa, and after big game? I can offer you one consolation, Lady Ireton. In his own interests Meyer will stick to his first assertion that Mr. De Lana was dining alone."

A strange, horribly pathetic look came into the woman's haunted eyes.

"You--you--are not acting for-----?" she began.

"I am acting for no one," replied Harley tersely. "Upon my friend's discretion you may rely as upon my own."

"Then why should he ever know?" she whispered.

"Why, indeed," murmured Harley, "since he is in Africa?"

As we descended the stair to the hall my friend paused and pointed to a life-sized oil painting by London's most fashionable portrait painter. It was that of a man in the uniform of a Guards officer, a dark man, slightly gray at the temples, his face very tanned as if by exposure to the sun.

"Having had no occasion for disguise when the portrait was painted," said Harley, "Lord Ireton appears here without the beard; and as he is not represented smiling one cannot see the gold tooth. But the painter, if anything, has accentuated the slanting eyes. You see, the fourth marquis--the present Lord Ireton's father--married one of the world-famous Yen Sun girls, daughters of the mandarin of that name by an Irish wife. Hence, the eyes. And hence-----"

"But, Harley--it was murder!"

"Not within the meaning of the law, Knox. It was a recrudescence of Chinese humour! Lord Ireton is officially in Africa (and he went actually after 'big game'). The counsel is not born who could secure a conviction. We are somewhat late, but shall therefore have less difficulty in finding a table at Prince's."



FARMER IN THE DELL [1919]

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *One Basket*, by Edna Ferber

Old Ben Westerveld was taking it easy. Every muscle taut, every nerve tense, his keen eyes vainly straining to pierce the blackness of the stuffy room--there lay Ben Westerveld in bed, taking it easy. And it was hard. Hard. He wanted to get up. He wanted so intensely to get up

that the mere effort of lying there made him ache all over. His toes were curled with the effort. His fingers were clenched with it. His breath came short, and his thighs felt cramped. Nerves. But old Ben Westerveld didn't know that. What should a retired and well-to-do farmer of fifty-eight know of nerves, especially when he has moved to the city and is taking it easy?

If only he knew what time it was. Here in Chicago you couldn't tell whether it was four o'clock or seven unless you looked at your watch. To do that it was necessary to turn on the light. And to turn on the light meant that he would turn on, too, a flood of querulous protest from his wife, Bella, who lay asleep beside him.

When for forty-five years of your life you have risen at four-thirty daily, it is difficult to learn to loll. To do it successfully, you must be a natural-born loller to begin with and revert. Bella Westerveld was and had. So there she lay, asleep. Old Ben wasn't and hadn't. So there he lay, terribly wide-awake, wondering what made his heart thump so fast when he was lying so still. If it had been light, you could have seen the lines of strained resignation in the sagging muscles of his patient face.

They had lived in the city for almost a year, but it was the same every morning. He would open his eyes, start up with one hand already reaching for the limp, drab work-worn garments that used to drape the chair by his bed. Then he would remember and sink back while a great wave of depression swept over him. Nothing to get up for. Store clothes on the chair by the bed. He was taking it easy.

Back home on the farm in southern Illinois he had known the hour the instant his eyes opened. Here the flat next door was so close that the bed-room was in twilight even at midday. On the farm he could tell by the feeling--an intangible thing, but infallible. He could gauge the very quality of the blackness that comes just before dawn. The crowing of the cocks, the stamping of the cattle, the twittering of the birds in the old elm whose branches were etched eerily against his window in the ghostly light--these things he had never needed. He had known. But here in the un-sylvan section of Chicago which bears the bosky name of Englewood, the very darkness had a strange quality.

A hundred unfamiliar noises misled him. There were no cocks, no cattle, no elm. Above all, there was no instinctive feeling. Once, when they first came to the city, he had risen at twelve-thirty, thinking it was morning, and had gone clumping about the flat, waking up everyone and loosing from his wife's lips a stream of acid vituperation that seared even his case-hardened sensibilities. The people sleeping in the bedroom of the flat next door must have heard her.

"You big rube! Getting up in the middle of the night and stomping

around like cattle. You'd better build a shed in the back yard and sleep there if you're so dumb you can't tell night from day."

Even after thirty-three years of marriage he had never ceased to be appalled at the coarseness of her mind and speech--she who had seemed so mild and fragile and exquisite when he married her. He had crept back to bed shamefacedly. He could hear the couple in the bedroom of the flat just across the little court grumbling and then laughing a little, grudgingly, and yet with appreciation. That bedroom, too, had still the power to appall him. Its nearness, its forced intimacy, were daily shocks to him whose most immediate neighbor, back on the farm, had been a quarter of a mile away. The sound of a shoe dropped on the hardwood floor, the rush of water in the bathroom, the murmur of nocturnal confidences, the fretful cry of a child in the night, all startled and distressed him whose ear had found music in the roar of the thresher and had been soothed by the rattle of the tractor and the hoarse hoot of the steamboat whistle at the landing. His farm's edge had been marked by the Mississippi rolling grandly by.

Since they had moved into town, he had found only one city sound that he really welcomed--the rattle and clink that marked the milkman's matutinal visit. The milkman came at six, and he was the good fairy who released Ben Westerveld from durance vile--or had until the winter months made his coming later and later, so that he became worse than useless as a timepiece. But now it was late March, and mild. The milkman's coming would soon again mark old Ben's rising hour. Before he had begun to take it easy, six o'clock had seen the entire mechanism of his busy little world humming smoothly and sweetly, the whole set in motion by his own big work-callused hands. Those hands puzzled him now. He often looked at them curiously and in a detached sort of way, as if they belonged to someone else. So white they were, and smooth and soft, with long, pliant nails that never broke off from rough work as they used to. Of late there were little splotches of brown on the backs of his hands and around the thumbs.

"Guess it's my liver," he decided, rubbing the spots thoughtfully. "She gets kind of sluggish from me not doing anything. Maybe a little spring tonic wouldn't go bad. Tone me up."

He got a little bottle of reddish-brown mixture from the druggist on Halstead Street near Sixty-third. A genial gentleman, the druggist, white-coated and dapper, stepping affably about the fragrant-smelling store. The reddish-brown mixture had toned old Ben up surprisingly--while it lasted. He had two bottles of it. But on discontinuing it he slumped back into his old apathy.

Ben Westerveld, in his store clothes, his clean blue shirt, his incongruous hat, ambling aimlessly about Chicago's teeming, gritty streets, was a tragedy. Those big, capable hands, now dangling so limply from inert wrists, had wrested a living from the soil; those

strangely unfaded blue eyes had the keenness of vision which comes from scanning great stretches of earth and sky; the stocky, square-shouldered body suggested power unutilized. All these spelled tragedy. Worse than tragedy--waste.

For almost half a century this man had combated the elements, head set, eyes wary, shoulders squared. He had fought wind and sun, rain and drought, scourge and flood. He had risen before dawn and slept before sunset. In the process he had taken on something of the color and the rugged immutability of the fields and hills and trees among which he toiled. Something of their dignity, too, though your town dweller might fail to see it beneath the drab exterior. He had about him none of the highlights and sharp points of the city man. He seemed to blend in with the background of nature so as to be almost undistinguishable from it, as were the furred and feathered creatures. This farmer differed from the city man as a hillock differs from an artificial golf bunker, though form and substance are the same.

Ben Westerveld didn't know he was a tragedy. Your farmer is not given to introspection. For that matter, anyone knows that a farmer in town is a comedy. Vaudeville, burlesque, the Sunday supplement, the comic papers, have marked him a fair target for ridicule. Perhaps one should know him in his overalled, stubble-bearded days, with the rich black loam of the Mississippi bottomlands clinging to his boots.

At twenty-five, given a tasseled cap, doublet and hose, and a long, slim pipe, Ben Westerveld would have been the prototype of one of those rollicking, lusty young mynheers that laugh out at you from a Frans Hals canvas. A roguish fellow with a merry eye; red-cheeked, vigorous. A serious mouth, though, and great sweetness of expression. As he grew older, the seriousness crept up and up and almost entirely obliterated the roguishness. By the time the life of ease claimed him, even the ghost of that ruddy wight of boyhood had vanished.

The Westerveld ancestry was as Dutch as the name. It had been hundreds of years since the first Westervelds came to America, and they had married and intermarried until the original Holland strain had almost entirely disappeared. They had drifted to southern Illinois by one of those slow processes of migration and had settled in Calhoun County, then almost a wilderness, but magnificent with its rolling hills, majestic rivers, and gold-and-purple distances. But to the practical Westerveld mind, hills and rivers and purple haze existed only in their relation to crops and weather. Ben, though, had a way of turning his face up to the sky sometimes, and it was not to scan the heavens for clouds. You saw him leaning on the plow handle to watch the whirring flight of a partridge across the meadow. He liked farming. Even the drudgery of it never made him grumble. He was a natural farmer as men are natural mechanics or musicians or salesmen. Things grew for him. He seemed instinctively to know facts about the kinship of soil and seed that other men had to learn from books or experience. It grew to

be a saying in that section that "Ben Westerveld could grow a crop on rock."

At picnics and neighborhood frolics Ben could throw farther and run faster and pull harder than any of the other farmer boys who took part in the rough games. And he could pick up a girl with one hand and hold her at arm's length while she shrieked with pretended fear and real ecstasy. The girls all liked Ben. There was that almost primitive strength which appealed to the untamed in them as his gentleness appealed to their softer side. He liked the girls, too, and could have had his pick of them. He teased them all, took them buggy riding, beamed them about to neighbor-hood parties. But by the time he was twenty-five the thing had narrowed down to the Byers girl on the farm adjoining Westerveld's. There was what the neighbors called an understanding, though perhaps he had never actually asked the Byers girl to marry him. You saw him going down the road toward the Byers place four nights out of the seven. He had a quick, light step at variance with his sturdy build, and very different from the heavy, slouching gait of the work-weary farmer. He had a habit of carrying in his hand a little twig or switch cut from a tree. This he would twirl blithely as he walked along. The switch and the twirl represented just so much energy and animal spirits. He never so much as flicked a dandelion head with it.

An inarticulate sort of thing, that courtship.

"Hello, Emma."

"How do, Ben."

"Thought you might like to walk a piece down the road. They got a calf at Aug Tietjens' with five legs."

"I heard. I'd just as lief walk a little piece. I'm kind of beat, though. We've got the threshers day after tomorrow. We've been cooking up."

Beneath Ben's bonhomie and roguishness there was much shyness. The two would plod along the road together in a sort of blissful agony of embarrassment. The neighbors were right in their surmise that there was no definite understanding between them. But the thing was settled in the minds of both. Once Ben had said: "Pop says I can have the north eighty on easy payments if--when----"

Emma Byers had flushed up brightly, but had answered equably: "That's a fine piece. Your pop is an awful good man."

The stolid exteriors of these two hid much that was fine and forceful. Emma Byers' thoughtful forehead and intelligent eyes would have revealed that in her. Her mother was dead. She kept house for her

father and brother. She was known as "that smart Byers girl." Her butter and eggs and garden stuff brought higher prices at Commercial, twelve miles away, than did any other's in the district. She was not a pretty girl, according to the local standards, but there was about her, even at twenty-two, a clear-headedness and a restful serenity that promised well for Ben Westerveld's future happiness.

But Ben Westerveld's future was not to lie in Emma Byers' capable hands. He knew that as soon as he saw Bella Huckins. Bella Huckins was the daughter of old "Red Front" Huckins, who ran the saloon of that cheerful name in Commercial. Bella had elected to teach school, not from any bent toward learning but because teaching appealed to her as being a rather elegant occupation. The Huckins family was not elegant. In that day a year or two of teaching in a country school took the place of the present-day normal-school diploma. Bella had an eye on St. Louis, forty miles from the town of Commercial. So she used the country school as a step toward her ultimate goal, though she hated the country and dreaded her apprenticeship.

"I'll get a beau," she said, "who'll take me driving and around. And Saturdays and Sundays I can come to town."

The first time Ben Westerveld saw her she was coming down the road toward him in her tight-fitting black alpaca dress. The sunset was behind her. Her hair was very golden. In a day of tiny waists hers could have been spanned by Ben Westerveld's two hands. He discovered that later. Just now he thought he had never seen anything so fairylike and dainty, though he did not put it that way. Ben was not glib of thought or speech.

He knew at once this was the new schoolteacher. He had heard of her coming, though at the time the conversation had interested him not at all. Bella knew who he was, too. She had learned the name and history of every eligible young man in the district two days after her arrival. That was due partly to her own bold curiosity and partly to the fact that she was boarding with the Widow Becker, the most notorious gossip in the county. In Bella's mental list of the neighborhood swains Ben Westerveld already occupied a position at the top of the column.

He felt his face redden as they approached each other. To hide his embarrassment he swung his little hickory switch gaily and called to his dog Dunder, who was nosing about by the roadside. Dunder bounded forward, spied the newcomer, and leaped toward her playfully and with natural canine curiosity.

Bella screamed. She screamed and ran to Ben and clung to him, clasping her hands about his arm. Ben lifted the hickory switch in his free hand and struck Dunder a sharp cut with it. It was the first time in his life that he had done such a thing. If he had had a sane moment from that time until the day he married Bella Huckins, he never would

have forgotten the dumb hurt in Dunder's stricken eyes and shrinking, quivering body.

Bella screamed again, still clinging to him. Ben was saying: "He won't hurt you. He won't hurt you," meanwhile patting her shoulder reassuringly. He looked down at her pale face. She was so slight, so childlike, so apparently different from the sturdy country girls. From--well, from the girls he knew. Her helplessness, her utter femininity, appealed to all that was masculine in him. Bella, the experienced, clinging to him, felt herself swept from head to foot by a queer electric tingling that was very pleasant but that still had in it something of the sensation of a wholesale bumping of one's crazy bone. If she had been anything but a stupid little flirt, she would have realized that here was a specimen of the virile male with which she could not trifle. She glanced up at him now, smiling faintly. "My, I was scared!" She stepped away from him a little--very little.

"Aw, he wouldn't hurt a flea."

But Bella looked over her shoulder fearfully to where Dunder stood by the roadside, regarding Ben with a look of uncertainty. He still thought that perhaps this was a new game. Not a game that he cared for, but still one to be played if his master fancied it. Ben stooped, picked up a stone, and threw it at Dunder, striking him in the flank.

"Go on home!" he commanded sternly. "Go home!" He started toward the dog with a well-feigned gesture of menace. Dunder, with a low howl, put his tail between his legs and loped off home, a disillusioned dog.

Bella stood looking up at Ben. Ben looked down at her. "You're the new teacher, ain't you?"

"Yes. I guess you must think I'm a fool, going on like a baby about that dog."

"Most girls would be scared of him if they didn't know he wouldn't hurt nobody. He's pretty big."

He paused a moment, awkwardly. "My name's Ben Westerveld."

"Pleased to meet you," said Bella. "Which way was you going? There's a dog down at Tietjens' that's enough to scare anybody. He looks like a pony, he's so big."

"I forgot something at the school this afternoon, and I was walking over to get it." Which was a lie. "I hope it won't get dark before I get there. You were going the other way, weren't you?"

"Oh, I wasn't going no place in particular. I'll be pleased to keep

you company down to the school and back." He was surprised at his own sudden masterfulness.

They set off together, chatting as freely as if they had known one another for years. Ben had been on his way to the Byers farm, as usual. The Byers farm and Emma Byers passed out of his mind as completely as if they had been whisked away on a magic rug.

Bella Huckins had never meant to marry him. She hated farm life.

She was contemptuous of farmer folk. She loathed cooking and drudgery. The Huckinses lived above the saloon in Commercial and Mrs. Huckins was always boiling ham and tongue and cooking pigs' feet and shredding cabbage for slaw, all these edibles being destined for the free-lunch counter downstairs. Bella had early made up her mind that there should be no boiling and stewing and frying in her life. Whenever she could find an excuse she loitered about the saloon. There she found life and talk and color. Old Red Front Huckins used to chase her away, but she always turned up again, somehow, with a dish for the lunch counter or with an armful of clean towels.

Ben Westerveld never said clearly to himself, "I want to marry Bella." He never dared meet the thought. He intended honestly to marry Emma Byers. But this thing was too strong for him. As for Bella, she laughed at him, but she was scared, too. They both fought the thing, she selfishly, he unselfishly, for the Byers girl, with her clear, calm eyes and her dependable ways, was heavy on his heart. Ben's appeal for Bella was merely that of the magnetic male. She never once thought of his finer qualities. Her appeal for him was that of the frail and alluring woman. But in the end they married. The neighborhood was rocked with surprise.

Usually in a courtship it is the male who assumes the bright colors of pretense in order to attract a mate. But Ben Westerveld had been too honest to be anything but himself. He was so honest and fundamentally truthful that he refused at first to allow himself to believe that this slovenly shrew was the fragile and exquisite creature he had married. He had the habit of personal cleanliness, had Ben, in a day when tubbing was a ceremony in an environment that made bodily nicety difficult. He discovered that Bella almost never washed and that her appearance of fragrant immaculateness, when dressed, was due to a natural clearness of skin and eye, and to the way her blond hair swept away in a clean line from her forehead. For the rest, she was a slattern, with a vocabulary of invective that would have been a credit to any of the habitues of old Red Front Huckins' bar.

They had three children, a girl and two boys. Ben Westerveld prospered in spite of his wife. As the years went on he added eighty acres here, eighty acres there, until his land swept down to the very banks of the Mississippi. There is no doubt that she hindered him greatly, but he

was too expert a farmer to fail. At threshing time the crew looked forward to working for Ben, the farmer, and dreaded the meals prepared by Bella, his wife. She was notoriously the worst cook and housekeeper in the county. And all through the years, in trouble and in happiness, her complaint was the same--"If I'd thought I was going to stick down on a farm all my life, slavin' for a pack of menfolks day and night, I'd rather have died. Might as well be dead as rottin' here."

Her schoolteacher English had early reverted. Her speech was as slovenly as her dress. She grew stout, too, and unwieldy, and her skin coarsened from lack of care and from overeating. And in her children's ears she continually dinned a hatred of farm life and farming. "You can get away from it," she counseled her daughter, Minnie. "Don't you be a rube like your pa," she cautioned John, the older boy. And they profited by her advice. Minnie went to work in Commercial when she was seventeen, an overdeveloped girl with an inordinate love of cheap finery. At twenty, she married an artisan, a surly fellow with roving tendencies. They moved from town to town. He never stuck long at one job. John, the older boy, was as much his mother's son as Minnie was her mother's daughter. Restless, dissatisfied, emptyheaded, he was the despair of his father. He drove the farm horses as if they were racers, lashing them up hill and down dale. He was forever lounging off to the village or wheedling his mother for money to take him to Commercial. It was before the day of the ubiquitous automobile. Given one of those present adjuncts to farm life, John would have ended his career much earlier. As it was, they found him lying by the roadside at dawn one morning after the horses had trotted into the yard with the wreck of the buggy bumping the road behind them. He had stolen the horses out of the barn after the help was asleep, had led them stealthily down the road, and then had whirled off to a rendezvous of his own in town. The fall from the buggy might not have hurt him, but evidently he had been dragged almost a mile before his battered body became somehow disentangled from the splintered wood and the reins.

That horror might have served to bring Ben Westerveld and his wife together, but it did not. It only increased her bitterness and her hatred of the locality and the life.

"I hope you're good an' satisfied now," she repeated in endless reproach. "I hope you're good an' satisfied. You was bound you'd make a farmer out of him, an' now you finished the job. You better try your hand at Dike now for a change."

Dike was young Ben, sixteen; and old Ben had no need to try his hand at him. Young Ben was a born farmer, as was his father. He had come honestly by his nickname. In face, figure, expression, and manner he was a five-hundred-year throwback to his Holland ancestors. Apple-cheeked, stocky, merry of eye, and somewhat phlegmatic. When, at school, they had come to the story of the Dutch boy who saved his town from flood by thrusting his finger into the hole in the dike and

holding it there until help came, the class, after one look at the accompanying picture in the reader, dubbed young Ben "Dike" Westerveld. And Dike he remained.

Between Dike and his father there was a strong but unspoken feeling. The boy was cropwise, as his father had been at his age. On Sundays you might see the two walking about the farm, looking at the pigs--great black fellows worth almost their weight in silver; eying the stock; speculating on the winter wheat showing dark green in April, with rich patches that were almost black. Young Dike smoked a solemn and judicious pipe, spat expertly, and voiced the opinion that the winter wheat was a fine prospect Ben Westerveld, listening tolerantly to the boy's opinions, felt a great surge of joy that he did not show. Here, at last, was compensation for all the misery and sordidness and bitter disappointment of his married life.

That married life had endured now for more than thirty years. Ben Westerveld still walked with a light, quick step--for his years. The stocky, broad-shouldered figure was a little shrunken. He was as neat and clean at fifty-five as he had been at twenty-five--a habit that, on a farm, is fraught with difficulties. The community knew and respected him. He was a man of standing. When he drove into town on a bright winter morning, in his big sheepskin coat and his shaggy cap and his great boots, and entered the First National Bank, even Shumway, the cashier, would look up from his desk to say:

"Hello, Westerveld! Hello! Well, how goes it?"

When Shumway greeted a farmer in that way you knew that there were no unpaid notes to his discredit.

All about Ben Westerveld stretched the fruit of his toil; the work of his hands. Orchards, fields, cattle, barns, silos. All these things were dependent on him for their future well-being--on him and on Dike after him. His days were full and running over. Much of the work was drudgery; most of it was backbreaking and laborious. But it was his place. It was his reason for being. And he felt that the reason was good, though he never put that thought into words, mental or spoken. He only knew that he was part of the great scheme of things and that he was functioning ably. If he had expressed himself at all, he might have said:

"Well, I got my work cut out for me, and I do it, and do it right."

There was a tractor, now, of course; and a sturdy, middle-class automobile in which Bella lolled red-faced when they drove into town.

As Ben Westerveld had prospered, his shrewish wife had reaped her benefits. Ben was not the selfish type of farmer who insists on twentieth-century farm implements and medieval household equipment. He

had added a bedroom here, a cool summer kitchen there, an icehouse, a commodious porch, a washing machine, even a bathroom. But Bella remained unplacated. Her face was set toward the city. And slowly, surely, the effect of thirty years of nagging was beginning to tell on Ben Westerveld. He was the finer metal, but she was the heavier, the coarser. She beat him and molded him as iron beats upon gold.

Minnie was living in Chicago now--a good-natured creature, but slack like her mother. Her surly husband was still talking of his rights and crying down with the rich. They had two children.

Minnie wrote of them, and of the delights of city life. Movies every night. Halsted Street just around the corner. The big stores. State Street. The el took you downtown in no time. Something going on all the while. Bella Westerveld, after one of those letters, was more than a chronic shrew; she became a terrible termagant.

When Ben Westerveld decided to concentrate on hogs and wheat he didn't dream that a world would be clamoring for hogs and wheat for four long years. When the time came, he had them, and sold them fabulously. But wheat and hogs and markets became negligible things on the day that Dike, with seven other farm boys from the district, left for the nearest training camp that was to fit them for France and war.

Bella made the real fuss, wailing and mouthing and going into hysterics. Old Ben took it like a stoic. He drove the boy to town that day. When the train pulled out, you might have seen, if you had looked close, how the veins and cords swelled in the lean brown neck above the clean blue shirt. But that was all. As the weeks went on, the quick, light step began to lag a little. He had lost more than a son; his right-hand helper was gone. There were no farm helpers to be had. Old Ben couldn't do it all. A touch of rheumatism that winter half crippled him for eight weeks. Bella's voice seemed never to stop its plaint.

"There ain't no sense in you trying to make out alone. Next thing you'll die on me, and then I'll have the whole shebang on my hands." At that he eyed her dumbly from his chair by the stove. His resistance was wearing down. He knew it. He wasn't dying. He knew that, too. But something in him was. Something that had resisted her all these years. Something that had made him master and superior in spite of everything.

In those days of illness, as he sat by the stove, the memory of Emma Byers came to him often. She had left that district twenty-eight years ago, and had married, and lived in Chicago somewhere, he had heard, and was prosperous. He wasted no time in idle regrets. He had been a fool, and he paid the price of fools. Bella, slamming noisily about the room, never suspected the presence in the untidy place of a third person--a sturdy girl of twenty-two or -three, very wholesome to look

at, and with honest, intelligent eyes and a serene brow.

"It'll get worse an' worse all the time," Bella's whine went on.

"Everybody says the war'll last prob'ly for years an' years. You can't make out alone. Everything's goin' to rack and ruin. You could rent out the farm for a year, on trial. The Burdickers'd take it, and glad. They got those three strappin' louts that's all flat-footed or slab-sided or cross-eyed or somethin', and no good for the army. Let them run it on shares. Maybe they'll even buy, if things turn out. Maybe Dike'll never come b----"

But at the look on his face then, and at the low growl of unaccustomed rage that broke from him, even she ceased her clatter.

They moved to Chicago in the early spring. The look that had been on Ben Westerveld's face when he drove Dike to the train that carried him to camp was stamped there again--indelibly this time, it seemed. Calhoun County in the spring has much the beauty of California. There is a peculiar golden light about it, and the hills are a purplish haze. Ben Westerveld, walking down his path to the gate, was more poignantly dramatic than any figure in a rural play. He did not turn to look back, though, as they do in a play. He dared not.

They rented a flat in Englewood, Chicago, a block from Minnie's. Bella was almost amiable these days. She took to city life as though the past thirty years had never been. White kid shoes, delicatessen stores, the movies, the haggling with peddlers, the crowds, the crashing noise, the cramped, unnatural mode of living--necessitated by a four-room flat--all these urban adjuncts seemed as natural to her as though she had been bred in the midst of them.

She and Minnie used to spend whole days in useless shopping. Theirs was a respectable neighborhood of well-paid artisans, bookkeepers, and small shopkeepers. The women did their own housework in drab garments and soiled boudoir caps that hid a multitude of unkempt heads. They seemed to find a great deal of time for amiable, empty gabbling. From seven to four you might see a pair of boudoir caps leaning from opposite bedroom windows, conversing across back porches, pausing in the task of sweeping front steps, standing at a street corner, laden with grocery bundles. Minnie wasted hours in what she called "running over to Ma's for a minute." The two quarreled a great deal, being so nearly of a nature. But the very qualities that combated each other seemed, by some strange chemical process, to bring them together as well.

"I'm going downtown today to do a little shopping," Minnie would say. "Do you want to come along, Ma?"

"What you got to get?"

"Oh, I thought I'd look at a couple little dresses for Pearlie."

"When I was your age I made every stitch you wore."

"Yeh, I bet they looked like it, too. This ain't the farm. I got all I can do to tend to the house, without sewing."

"I did it. I did the housework and the sewin' and cookin', an' besides----"

"A swell lot of housekeepin' you did. You don't need to tell me."

The bickering grew to a quarrel. But in the end they took the downtown el together. You saw them, flushed of face, with twitching fingers, indulging in a sort of orgy of dime spending in the five-and-ten-cent store on the wrong side of State Street.

They pawed over bolts of cheap lace and bits of stuff in the stifling air of the crowded place. They would buy a sack of salted peanuts from the great mound in the glass case, or a bag of the greasy pink candy piled in profusion on the counter, and this they would munch as they went.

They came home late, fagged and irritable, and supplemented their hurried dinner with hastily bought food from the near-by delicatessen.

Thus ran the life of ease for Ben Westerveld, retired farmer. And so now he lay impatiently in bed, rubbing a nervous forefinger over the edge of the sheet and saying to himself that, well, here was another day. What day was it? L'see now. Yesterday was--yesterday. A little feeling of panic came over him. He couldn't remember what yesterday had been. He counted back laboriously and decided that today must be Thursday. Not that it made any difference.

They had lived in the city almost a year now. But the city had not digested Ben. He was a leathery morsel that could not be assimilated. There he stuck in Chicago's crop, contributing nothing, gaining nothing. A rube in a comic collar ambling aimlessly about Halsted Street or State downtown. You saw him conversing hungrily with the gritty and taciturn Swede who was janitor for the block of red-brick flats. Ben used to follow him around pathetically, engaging him in the talk of the day. Ben knew no men except the surly Gus, Minnie's husband. Gus, the firebrand, thought Ben hardly worthy of his contempt. If Ben thought, sometimes, of the respect with which he had always been greeted when he clumped down the main street of Commercial--if he thought of how the farmers for miles around had come to him for expert advice and opinion--he said nothing.

Sometimes the janitor graciously allowed Ben to attend to the furnace of the building in which he lived. He took out ashes, shoveled coal.

He tinkered and rattled and shook things. You heard him shoveling and scraping down there, and smelled the acrid odor of his pipe. It gave him something to do. He would emerge sooty and almost happy.

"You been monkeying with that furnace again!" Bella would scold. "If you want something to do, why don't you plant a garden in the back yard and grow something? You was crazy about it on the farm."

His face flushed a slow, dull red at that. He could not explain to her that he lost no dignity in his own eyes in fussing about an inadequate little furnace, but that self-respect would not allow him to stoop to gardening--he who had reigned over six hundred acres of bountiful soil.

On winter afternoons you saw him sometimes at the movies, whiling away one of his many idle hours in the dim, close-smelling atmosphere of the place. Tokyo and Rome and Gallipoli came to him. He saw beautiful tiger-women twining fair, false arms about the stalwart but yielding forms of young men with cleft chins. He was only mildly interested. He talked to anyone who would talk to him, though he was naturally a shy man. He talked to the barber, the grocer, the druggist, the streetcar conductor, the milkman, the iceman. But the price of wheat did not interest these gentlemen. They did not know that the price of wheat was the most vital topic of conversation in the world.

"Well, now," he would say, "you take this year's wheat crop, with about 917,000,000 bushels of wheat harvested, why, that's what's going to win the war! Yes, sirree! No wheat, no winning, that's what I say."

"Ya-as, it is!" the city men would scoff. But the queer part of it is that Farmer Ben was right.

Minnie got into the habit of using him as a sort of nursemaid. It gave her many hours of freedom for gadding and gossiping.

"Pa, will you look after Pearlle for a little while this morning? I got to run downtown to match something and she gets so tired and mean-acting if I take her along. Ma's going with me."

He loved the feel of Pearlle's small, velvet-soft hand in his big fist. He called her "little feller," and fed her forbidden dainties. His big brown fingers were miraculously deft at buttoning and unbuttoning her tiny garments, and wiping her soft lips, and performing a hundred tender offices. He was playing a sort of game with himself, pretending this was Dike become a baby again. Once the pair managed to get over to Lincoln Park, where they spent a glorious day looking at the animals, eating popcorn, and riding on the miniature railway.

They returned, tired, dusty, and happy, to a double tirade.

Bella engaged in a great deal of what she called worrying about Dike.

Ben spoke of him seldom, but the boy was always present in his thoughts. They had written him of their move, but he had not seemed to get the impression of its permanence. His letters indicated that he thought they were visiting Minnie, or taking a vacation in the city. Dike's letters were few. Ben treasured them, and read and reread them. When the Armistice news came, and with it the possibility of Dike's return, Ben tried to fancy him fitting into the life of the city. And his whole being revolted at the thought.

He saw the pimply-faced, sallow youths standing at the corner of Halsted and Sixty-third, spitting languidly and handling their limp cigarettes with an amazing labial dexterity. Their conversation was low-voiced, sinister, and terse, and their eyes narrowed as they watched the overdressed, scarlet-lipped girls go by. A great fear clutched at Ben Westerveld's heart.

The lack of exercise and manual labor began to tell on Ben. He did not grow fat from idleness. Instead his skin seemed to sag and hang on his frame, like a garment grown too large for him. He walked a great deal. Perhaps that had something to do with it. He tramped miles of city pavements. He was a very lonely man. And then, one day, quite by accident, he came upon South Water Street. Came upon it, stared at it as a water-crazed traveler in a desert gazes upon the spring in the oasis, and drank from it, thirstily, gratefully.

South Water Street feeds Chicago. Into that close-packed thoroughfare come daily the fruits and vegetables that will supply a million tables. Ben had heard of it, vaguely, but had never attempted to find it. Now he stumbled upon it and, standing there, felt at home in Chicago for the first time in more than a year. He saw ruddy men walking about in overalls and carrying whips in their hands--wagon whips, actually. He hadn't seen men like that since he had left the farm. The sight of them sent a great pang of homesickness through him. His hand reached out and he ran an accustomed finger over the potatoes in a barrel on the walk. His fingers lingered and gripped them, and passed over them lovingly.

At the contact something within him that had been tight and hungry seemed to relax, satisfied. It was his nerves, feeding on those familiar things for which they had been starving.

He walked up one side and down the other. Crates of lettuce, bins of onions, barrels of apples. Such vegetables! The radishes were scarlet globes. Each carrot was a spear of pure orange. The green and purple of fancy asparagus held his expert eye. The cauliflower was like a great bouquet, fit for a bride; the cabbages glowed like jade.

And the men! He hadn't dreamed there were men like that in this big, shiny-shod, stiffly laundered, white-collared city. Here were rufous men in overalls--worn, shabby, easy-looking overalls and old blue

shirts, and mashed hats worn at a careless angle. Men, jovial, good-natured, with clear eyes, and having about them some of the revivifying freshness and wholesomeness of the products they handled.

Ben Westerveld breathed in the strong, pungent smell of onions and garlic and of the earth that seemed to cling to the vegetables, washed clean though they were. He breathed deeply, gratefully, and felt strangely at peace.

It was a busy street. A hundred times he had to step quickly to avoid a hand truck, or dray, or laden wagon. And yet the busy men found time to greet him friendly. "H'are you!" they said genially. "H'are you this morning!"

He was marketwise enough to know that some of these busy people were commission men, and some grocers, and some buyers, stewards, clerks. It was a womanless thoroughfare. At the busiest business corner, though, in front of the largest commission house on the street, he saw a woman. Evidently she was transacting business, too, for he saw the men bringing boxes of berries and vegetables for her inspection. A woman in a plain blue skirt and a small black hat.

A funny job for a woman. What weren't they mixing into nowadays!

He turned sidewise in the narrow, crowded space in order to pass her little group. And one of the men--a red-cheeked, merry-looking young fellow in a white apron--laughed and said: "Well, Emma, you win. When it comes to driving a bargain with you, I quit. It can't be did!"

Even then he didn't know her. He did not dream that this straight, slim, tailored, white-haired woman, bargaining so shrewdly with these men, was the Emma Byers of the old days. But he stopped there a moment, in frank curiosity, and the woman looked up. She looked up, and he knew those intelligent eyes and that serene brow. He had carried the picture of them in his mind for more than thirty years, so it was not so surprising.

He did not hesitate. He might have if he had thought a moment, but he acted automatically. He stood before her. "You're Emma Byers, ain't you?"

She did not know him at first. Small blame to her, so completely had the roguish, vigorous boy vanished in this sallow, sad-eyed old man. Then: "Why, Ben!" she said quietly. And there was pity in her voice, though she did not mean to have it there. She put out one hand--that capable, reassuring hand--and gripped his and held it a moment. It was queer and significant that it should be his hand that lay within hers.

"Well, what in all get-out are you doing around here, Emma?" He tried to be jovial and easy. She turned to the aproned man with whom she had

been dealing and smiled.

"What am I doing here, Joe?"

Joe grinned, waggishly. "Nothin'; only beatin' every man on the street at his own game, and makin' so much money that----"

But she stopped him there. "I guess I'll do my own explaining." She turned to Ben again. "And what are you doing here in Chicago?"

Ben passed a faltering hand across his chin. "Me? Well, I'm--we're living here, I s'pose. Livin' here."

She glanced at him sharply. "Left the farm, Ben?"

"Yes."

"Wait a minute." She concluded her business with Joe; finished it briskly and to her own satisfaction. With her bright brown eyes and her alert manner and her quick little movements she made you think of a wren--a businesslike little wren--a very early wren that is highly versed in the worm-catching way.

At her next utterance he was startled but game.

"Have you had your lunch?"

"Why, no; I----"

"I've been down here since seven, and I'm starved. Let's go and have a bite at the little Greek restaurant around the corner. A cup of coffee and a sandwich, anyway."

Seated at the bare little table, she surveyed him with those intelligent, understanding, kindly eyes, and he felt the years slip from him. They were walking down the country road together, and she was listening quietly and advising him.

She interrogated him gently. But something of his old masterfulness came back to him. "No, I want to know about you first. I can't get the rights of it, you being here on South Water, tradin' and all."

So she told him briefly. She was in the commission business. Successful. She bought, too, for such hotels as the Blackstone and the Congress, and for half a dozen big restaurants. She gave him bare facts, but he was shrewd enough and sufficiently versed in business to know that here was a woman of established commercial position.

"But how does it happen you're keepin' it up, Emma, all this time? Why, you must be anyway--it ain't that you look it--but----" He

floundered, stopped.

She laughed. "That's all right, Ben. I couldn't fool you on that. And I'm working because it keeps me happy. I want to work till I die. My children keep telling me to stop, but I know better than that. I'm not going to rust out. I want to wear out." Then, at an unspoken question in his eyes: "He's dead. These twenty years. It was hard at first, when the children were small. But I knew garden stuff if I didn't know anything else. It came natural to me. That's all."

So then she got his story from him bit by bit. He spoke of the farm and of Dike, and there was a great pride in his voice. He spoke of Bella, and the son who had been killed, and of Minnie. And the words came falteringly. He was trying to hide something, and he was not made for deception. When he had finished:

"Now, listen, Ben. You go back to your farm."

"I can't. She--I can't."

She leaned forward, earnestly. "You go back to the farm."

He turned up his palms with a little gesture of defeat. "I can't."

"You can't stay here. It's killing you. It's poisoning you. Did you ever hear of toxins? That means poisons, and you're poisoning yourself. You'll die of it. You've got another twenty years of work in you. What's ailing you? You go back to your wheat and your apples and your hogs. There isn't a bigger job in the world than that."

For a moment his face took on a glow from the warmth of her own inspiring personality. But it died again. When they rose to go, his shoulders drooped again, his muscles sagged. At the doorway he paused a moment, awkward in farewell. He blushed a little, stammered.

"Emma--I always wanted to tell you. God knows it was luck for you the way it turned out--but I always wanted to----"

She took his hand again in her firm grip at that, and her kindly, bright brown eyes were on him. "I never held it against you, Ben. I had to live a long time to understand it. But I never held a grudge. It just wasn't to be, I suppose. But listen to me, Ben. You do as I tell you. You go back to your wheat and your apples and your hogs. There isn't a bigger man-size job in the world. It's where you belong."

Unconsciously his shoulders straightened again. Again they sagged. And so they parted, the two.

He must have walked almost all the long way home, through miles and miles of city streets. He must have lost his way, too, for when he

looked up at a corner street sign it was an unfamiliar one.

So he floundered about, asked his way, was misdirected. He took the right streetcar at last and got off at his own corner at seven o'clock, or later. He was in for a scolding, he knew.

But when he came to his own doorway he knew that even his tardiness could not justify the bedlam of sound that came from within. High-pitched voices. Bella's above all the rest, of course, but there was Minnie's too, and Gus's growl, and Pearlie's treble, and the boy Ed's and----

At the other voice his hand trembled so that the knob rattled in the door, and he could not turn it. But finally he did turn it, and stumbled in, breathing hard. And that other voice was Dike's.

He must have just arrived. The flurry of explanation was still in progress. Dike's knapsack was still on his back, and his canteen at his hip, his helmet slung over his shoulder. A brown, hard, glowing Dike, strangely tall and handsome and older, too. Older.

All this Ben saw in less than one electric second. Then he had the boy's two shoulders in his hands, and Dike was saying, "Hello, Pop."

Of the roomful, Dike and old Ben were the only quiet ones. The others were taking up the explanation and going over it again and again, and marveling, and asking questions.

"He come in to--what's that place, Dike?--Hoboken--yesterday only. An' he sent a dispatch to the farm. Can't you read our letters, Dike, that you didn't know we was here now? And then he's only got an hour more. They got to go to Camp Grant to be, now, demobilized. He came out to Minnie's on a chance. Ain't he big!"

But Dike and his father were looking at each other quietly. Then Dike spoke. His speech was not phlegmatic, as of old. He had a new clipped way of uttering his words:

"Say, Pop, you ought to see the way the Frenchies farm! They got about an acre each, and, say, they use every inch of it. If they's a little dirt blows into the crotch of a tree, they plant a crop in there. I never seen nothin' like it. Say, we waste enough stuff over here to keep that whole country in food for a hundred years. Yessir. And tools! Outta the ark, believe me. If they ever saw our tractor, they'd think it was the Germans comin' back. But they're smart at that. I picked up a lot of new ideas over there. And you ought to see the old birds--womenfolks and men about eighty years old--runnin' everything on the farm. They had to. I learned somethin' off them about farmin'."

"Forget the farm," said Minnie.

"Yeh," echoed Gus, "forget the farm stuff. I can get you a job here out at the works for four-fifty a day, and six when you learn it right."

Dike looked from one to the other, alarm and unbelief on his face. "What d'you mean, a job? Who wants a job! What you all----"

Bella laughed jovially. "F'r heaven's sakes, Dike, wake up! We're livin' here. This is our place. We ain't rubes no more."

Dike turned to his father. A little stunned look crept into his face. A stricken, pitiful look. There was something about it that suddenly made old Ben think of Pearlie when she had been slapped by her quick-tempered mother.

"But I been countin' on the farm," he said miserably. "I just been livin' on the idea of comin' back to it. Why, I---- The streets here, they're all narrow and choked up. I been countin' on the farm. I want to go back and be a farmer. I want----"

And then Ben Westerveld spoke. A new Ben Westerveld--the old Ben Westerveld. Ben Westerveld, the farmer, the monarch over six hundred acres of bounteous bottomland.

"That's all right, Dike," he said. "You're going back. So'm I. I've got another twenty years of work in me. We're going back to the farm."

Bella turned on him, a wildcat. "We ain't! Not me! We ain't! I'm not agoin' back to the farm."

But Ben Westerveld was master again in his own house. "You're goin' back, Bella," he said quietly, "an' things are goin' to be different. You're goin' to run the house the way I say, or I'll know why. If you can't do it, I'll get them in that can. An' me and Dike, we're goin' back to our wheat and our apples and our hogs. Yessir! There ain't a bigger man-size job in the world."



SPRINGTIME À LA CARTE

From: The Project Gutenberg eBook, *The Four Million*, by O. Henry

It was a day in March.

Never, never begin a story this way when you write one. No opening could possibly be worse. It is unimaginative, flat, dry and likely to consist

of mere wind. But in this instance it is allowable. For the following paragraph, which should have inaugurated the narrative, is too wildly extravagant and preposterous to be flaunted in the face of the reader without preparation.

Sarah was crying over her bill of fare.

Think of a New York girl shedding tears on the menu card!

To account for this you will be allowed to guess that the lobsters were all out, or that she had sworn ice-cream off during Lent, or that she had ordered onions, or that she had just come from a Hackett matinee. And then, all these theories being wrong, you will please let the story proceed.

The gentleman who announced that the world was an oyster which he with his sword would open made a larger hit than he deserved. It is not difficult to open an oyster with a sword. But did you ever notice any one try to open the terrestrial bivalve with a typewriter? Like to wait for a dozen raw opened that way?

Sarah had managed to pry apart the shells with her unhandy weapon far enough to nibble a wee bit at the cold and clammy world within. She knew no more shorthand than if she had been a graduate in stenography just let slip upon the world by a business college. So, not being able to stenog, she could not enter that bright galaxy of office talent. She was a free-lance typewriter and canvassed for odd jobs of copying.

The most brilliant and crowning feat of Sarah's battle with the world was the deal she made with Schulenberg's Home Restaurant. The restaurant was next door to the old red brick in which she ball-roomed. One evening after dining at Schulenberg's 40-cent, five-course _table d'hôte_ (served as fast as you throw the five baseballs at the coloured gentleman's head) Sarah took away with her the bill of fare. It was written in an almost unreadable script neither English nor German, and so arranged that if you were not careful you began with a toothpick and rice pudding and ended with soup and the day of the week.

The next day Sarah showed Schulenberg a neat card on which the menu was beautifully typewritten with the viands temptingly marshalled under their right and proper heads from "hors d'oeuvre" to "not responsible for overcoats and umbrellas."

Schulenberg became a naturalised citizen on the spot. Before Sarah left him she had him willingly committed to an agreement. She was to furnish typewritten bills of fare for the twenty-one tables in the restaurant--a new bill for each day's dinner, and new ones for breakfast and lunch as often as changes occurred in the food or as neatness required.

In return for this Schulenberg was to send three meals per diem to

Sarah's hall room by a waiter--an obsequious one if possible--and furnish her each afternoon with a pencil draft of what Fate had in store for Schulenberg's customers on the morrow.

Mutual satisfaction resulted from the agreement. Schulenberg's patrons now knew what the food they ate was called even if its nature sometimes puzzled them. And Sarah had food during a cold, dull winter, which was the main thing with her.

And then the almanac lied, and said that spring had come. Spring comes when it comes. The frozen snows of January still lay like adamant in the crosstown streets. The hand-organs still played "In the Good Old Summertime," with their December vivacity and expression. Men began to make thirty-day notes to buy Easter dresses. Janitors shut off steam. And when these things happen one may know that the city is still in the clutches of winter.

One afternoon Sarah shivered in her elegant hall bedroom; "house heated; scrupulously clean; conveniences; seen to be appreciated." She had no work to do except Schulenberg's menu cards. Sarah sat in her squeaky willow rocker, and looked out the window. The calendar on the wall kept crying to her: "Springtime is here, Sarah--springtime is here, I tell you. Look at me, Sarah, my figures show it. You've got a neat figure yourself, Sarah--a--nice springtime figure--why do you look out the window so sadly?"

Sarah's room was at the back of the house. Looking out the window she could see the windowless rear brick wall of the box factory on the next street. But the wall was clearest crystal; and Sarah was looking down a grassy lane shaded with cherry trees and elms and bordered with raspberry bushes and Cherokee roses.

Spring's real harbingers are too subtle for the eye and ear. Some must have the flowering crocus, the wood-starring dogwood, the voice of bluebird--even so gross a reminder as the farewell handshake of the retiring buckwheat and oyster before they can welcome the Lady in Green to their dull bosoms. But to old earth's choicest kin there come straight, sweet messages from his newest bride, telling them they shall be no stepchildren unless they choose to be.

On the previous summer Sarah had gone into the country and loved a farmer.

(In writing your story never hark back thus. It is bad art, and cripples interest. Let it march, march.)

Sarah stayed two weeks at Sunnybrook Farm. There she learned to love old Farmer Franklin's son Walter. Farmers have been loved and wedded and turned out to grass in less time. But young Walter Franklin was a modern agriculturist. He had a telephone in his cow house, and he could figure

up exactly what effect next year's Canada wheat crop would have on potatoes planted in the dark of the moon.

It was in this shaded and raspberried lane that Walter had wooed and won her. And together they had sat and woven a crown of dandelions for her hair. He had immoderately praised the effect of the yellow blossoms against her brown tresses; and she had left the chaplet there, and walked back to the house swinging her straw sailor in her hands.

They were to marry in the spring--at the very first signs of spring, Walter said. And Sarah came back to the city to pound her typewriter.

A knock at the door dispelled Sarah's visions of that happy day. A waiter had brought the rough pencil draft of the Home Restaurant's next day fare in old Schulenberg's angular hand.

Sarah sat down to her typewriter and slipped a card between the rollers. She was a nimble worker. Generally in an hour and a half the twenty-one menu cards were written and ready.

To-day there were more changes on the bill of fare than usual. The soups were lighter; pork was eliminated from the entrées, figuring only with Russian turnips among the roasts. The gracious spirit of spring pervaded the entire menu. Lamb, that lately capered on the greening hillsides, was becoming exploited with the sauce that commemorated its gambols. The song of the oyster, though not silenced, was *_dimuendo con amore_*. The frying-pan seemed to be held, inactive, behind the beneficent bars of the broiler. The pie list swelled; the richer puddings had vanished; the sausage, with his drapery wrapped about him, barely lingered in a pleasant thanatopsis with the buckwheats and the sweet but doomed maple.

Sarah's fingers danced like midgets above a summer stream. Down through the courses she worked, giving each item its position according to its length with an accurate eye. Just above the desserts came the list of vegetables. Carrots and peas, asparagus on toast, the perennial tomatoes and corn and succotash, lima beans, cabbage--and then--

Sarah was crying over her bill of fare. Tears from the depths of some divine despair rose in her heart and gathered to her eyes. Down went her head on the little typewriter stand; and the keyboard rattled a dry accompaniment to her moist sobs.

For she had received no letter from Walter in two weeks, and the next item on the bill of fare was dandelions--dandelions with some kind of egg--but bother the egg!--dandelions, with whose golden blooms Walter had crowned her his queen of love and future bride--dandelions, the harbingers of spring, her sorrow's crown of sorrow--reminder of her happiest days.

Madam, I dare you to smile until you suffer this test: Let the Marechal

Niel roses that Percy brought you on the night you gave him your heart be served as a salad with French dressing before your eyes at a Schulenberg _table d'hôte_. Had Juliet so seen her love tokens dishonoured the sooner would she have sought the lethean herbs of the good apothecary.

But what a witch is Spring! Into the great cold city of stone and iron a message had to be sent. There was none to convey it but the little hardy courier of the fields with his rough green coat and modest air. He is a true soldier of fortune, this _dent-de-lion_--this lion's tooth, as the French chefs call him. Flowered, he will assist at love-making, wreathed in my lady's nut-brown hair; young and callow and unblossomed, he goes into the boiling pot and delivers the word of his sovereign mistress.

By and by Sarah forced back her tears. The cards must be written. But, still in a faint, golden glow from her dandeleonine dream, she fingered the typewriter keys absently for a little while, with her mind and heart in the meadow lane with her young farmer. But soon she came swiftly back to the rock-bound lanes of Manhattan, and the typewriter began to rattle and jump like a strike-breaker's motor car.

At 6 o'clock the waiter brought her dinner and carried away the typewritten bill of fare. When Sarah ate she set aside, with a sigh, the dish of dandelions with its crowning ovarious accompaniment. As this dark mass had been transformed from a bright and love-indorsed flower to be an ignominious vegetable, so had her summer hopes wilted and perished. Love may, as Shakespeare said, feed on itself: but Sarah could not bring herself to eat the dandelions that had graced, as ornaments, the first spiritual banquet of her heart's true affection.

At 7:30 the couple in the next room began to quarrel: the man in the room above sought for A on his flute; the gas went a little lower; three coal wagons started to unload--the only sound of which the phonograph is jealous; cats on the back fences slowly retreated toward Mukden. By these signs Sarah knew that it was time for her to read. She got out "The Cloister and the Hearth," the best non-selling book of the month, settled her feet on her trunk, and began to wander with Gerard.

The front door bell rang. The landlady answered it. Sarah left Gerard and Denys treed by a bear and listened. Oh, yes; you would, just as she did!

And then a strong voice was heard in the hall below, and Sarah jumped for her door, leaving the book on the floor and the first round easily the bear's. You have guessed it. She reached the top of the stairs just as her farmer came up, three at a jump, and reaped and garnered her, with nothing left for the gleaners.

"Why haven't you written--oh, why?" cried Sarah.

"New York is a pretty large town," said Walter Franklin. "I came in a week ago to your old address. I found that you went away on a Thursday. That consoled some; it eliminated the possible Friday bad luck. But it didn't prevent my hunting for you with police and otherwise ever since!

"I wrote!" said Sarah, vehemently.

"Never got it!"

"Then how did you find me?"

The young farmer smiled a springtime smile.

"I dropped into that Home Restaurant next door this evening," said he. "I don't care who knows it; I like a dish of some kind of greens at this time of the year. I ran my eye down that nice typewritten bill of fare looking for something in that line. When I got below cabbage I turned my chair over and hollered for the proprietor. He told me where you lived."

"I remember," sighed Sarah, happily. "That was dandelions below cabbage."

"I'd know that cranky capital W 'way above the line that your typewriter makes anywhere in the world," said Franklin.

"Why, there's no W in dandelions," said Sarah, in surprise.

The young man drew the bill of fare from his pocket, and pointed to a line.

Sarah recognised the first card she had typewritten that afternoon. There was still the rayed splotch in the upper right-hand corner where a tear had fallen. But over the spot where one should have read the name of the meadow plant, the clinging memory of their golden blossoms had allowed her fingers to strike strange keys.

Between the red cabbage and the stuffed green peppers was the item:

"DEAREST WALTER, WITH HARD-BOILED EGG."



MIMI'S MARRIAGE

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Balcony Stories*, by Grace E. King

This how she told about it, sitting in her little room,--her bridal chamber,--not larger, really not larger than sufficed for the bed there, the armoire here, the bureau opposite, and the washstand behind the door, the corners all touching. But a nice set of furniture, quite *_comme il faut_*,--handsome, in fact,--as a bride of good family should have. And she was dressed very prettily, too, in her long white *_negligée_*, with plenty of lace and ruffles and blue ribbons,--such as only the Creole girls can make, and brides, alas! wear,--the pretty honeymoon costume that suggests, that suggests--well! to proceed. "The poor little cat!" as one could not help calling her, so *_mignonne_*, so blond, with the pretty black eyes, and the rosebud of a mouth,--whenever she closed it,--a perfect kiss.

"But you know, Louise," she said, beginning quite seriously at the beginning, "papa would never have consented, never, never--poor papa! Indeed, I should never have asked him; it would only have been one humiliation more for him, poor papa! So it was well he was dead, if it was God's will for it to be. Of course I had my dreams, like everybody. I was so blond, so blond, and so small; it seemed like a law I should marry a *_brun_*, a tall, handsome *_brun_*, with a mustache and a fine barytone voice. That was how I always arranged it, and--you will laugh--but a large, large house, and numbers of servants, and a good cook, but a superlatively good cuisine, and wine and all that, and long, trailing silk dresses, and theater every night, and voyages to Europe, and--well, everything God had to give, in fact. You know, I get that from papa, wanting everything God has to give! Poor papa! It seemed to me I was to meet him at any time, my handsome *_brun_*. I used to look for him positively on my way to school, and back home again, and whenever I would think of him I would try and walk so prettily, and look so pretty! *_Mon Dieu!* I was not ten years old yet! And afterward it was only for that that I went into society. What should girls go into society for otherwise but to meet their *_brun_* or their blond? Do you think it is amusing, to economize and economize, and sew and sew, just to go to a party to dance? No! I assure you, I went into society only for that; and I do not believe what girls say--they go into society only for that too.

"You know at school how we used to *_tirer la bonne aventure_*. [1] Well, every time he was not *_brun, riche, avenant_*, Jules, or Raoul, or Guy, I simply would not accept it, but would go on drawing until I obtained what I wanted. As I tell you, I thought it was my destiny. And when I would try with a flower to see if he loved me,--*_Il m'aime, un peu, beaucoup, passionément, pas du tout_*,--if it were *_pas du tout_*, I would always throw the flower away, and begin tearing off the leaves from another one immediately. *_Passionément_* was what I wanted, and I

always got it in the end.

[Footnote 1: *_La bonne aventure_* is or was generally a very much battered foolscap copy-book, which contained a list of all possible elements of future (school-girl) happiness. Each item answered a question, and had a number affixed to it. To draw one's fortune consisted in asking question after question, and guessing a number, a companion volunteering to read the answers. To avoid cheating, the books were revised from time to time, and the numbers changed.]

"But papa, poor papa, he never knew anything of that, of course. He would get furious when any one would come to see me, and sometimes, when he would take me in society, if I danced with a 'nobody,'--as he called no matter whom I danced with,--he would come up and take me away with such an air--such an air! It would seem that papa thought himself better than everybody in the world. But it went worse and worse with papa, not only in the affairs of the world, but in health. Always thinner and thinner, always a cough; in fact, you know, I am a little feeble-chested myself, from papa. And Clementine! Clementine with her children--just think, Louise, eight! I thank God my mama had only me, if papa's second wife had to have so many. And so naughty! I assure you, they were all devils; and no correction, no punishment, no education--but you know Clementine! I tell you, sometimes on account of those children I used to think myself in 'ell [making the Creole's attempt and failure to pronounce the h], and Clementine had no pride about them. If they had shoes, well; if they had not shoes, well also.

"But Clementine!" I would expostulate, I would pray--

"But do not be a fool, Mimi," she would say. 'Am I God? Can I do miracles? Or must I humiliate your papa?'

"That was true. Poor papa! It would have humiliated papa. When he had money he gave; only it was a pity he had no money. As for what he observed, he thought it was Clementine's negligence. For, it is true, Clementine had no order, no industry, in the best of fortune as in the worst. But to do her justice, it was not her fault this time, only she let him believe it, to save his pride; and Clementine, you know, has a genius for stories. I assure you, Louise, I was desperate. I prayed to God to help me, to advise me. I could not teach--I had no education; I could not go into a shop--that would be dishonoring papa--and *_enfin_*, I was too pretty. 'And proclaim to the world,' Clementine would cry, 'that your papa does not make money for his family.' That was true. The world is so malicious. You know, Louise, sometimes it seems to me the world is glad to hear that a man cannot support his family; it compliments those who can. As if papa had not intelligence, and honor, and honesty! But they do not count now as in old times, 'before the war.'

"And so, when I thought of that, I laughed and talked and played the thoughtless like Clementine, and made bills. We made bills--we had to--for everything; we could do that, you know, on our old name and family. But it is too long! I am sure it is too long and tiresome! What egotism on my part! Come, we will take a glass of anisette, and talk of something else--your trip, your family. No? no? You are only asking me out of politeness! You are so aimable, so kind. Well, if you are not ennuyée--in fact, I want to tell you. It was too long to write, and I detest a pen. To me there is no instrument of torture like a pen.

"Well, the lady next door, she was an American, and common, very common, according to papa. In comparison to us she had no family whatever. Our little children were forbidden even to associate with her little children. I thought that was ridiculous--not that I am a democrat, but I thought it ridiculous. But the children cared; they were so disobedient and they were always next door, and they always had something nice to eat over there. I sometimes thought Clementine used to encourage their disobedience, just for the good things they got to eat over there. But papa was always making fun of them; you know what a sharp tongue he had. The gentleman was a clerk; and, according to papa, the only true gentlemen in the world had family and a profession. We did not dare allow ourselves to think it, but Clementine and I knew that they, in fact, were in more comfortable circumstances than we.

"The lady, who also had a great number of children, sent one day, with all the discretion and delicacy possible, and asked me if I would be so kind as to--guess what, Louise! But only guess! But you never could! Well, to darn some of her children's stockings for her. It was God who inspired her, I am sure, on account of my praying so much to him. You will be shocked, Louise, when I tell you. It sounds like a sin, but I was not in despair when papa died. It was a grief,--yes, it seized the heart, but it was not despair. Men ought not to be subjected to the humiliation of life; they are not like women, you know. We are made to stand things; they have their pride,--their orgueil, as we say in French,--and that is the point of honor with some men. And Clementine and I, we could not have concealed it much longer. In fact, the truth was crying out everywhere, in the children, in the house, in our own persons, in our faces. The darning did not provide a superfluity, I guarantee you!

"Poor papa! He caught cold. He was condemned from the first. And so all his fine qualities died; for he had fine qualities--they were too fine for this age, that was all. Yes; it was a kindness of God to take him before he found out. If it was to be, it was better. Just so with Clementine as with me. After the funeral--crack! everything went to pieces. We were at the four corners for the necessities of life, and the bills came in--my dear, the bills that came in! What memories! what memories! Clementine and I exclaimed; there were some bills that

we had completely forgotten about. The lady next door sent her brother over when papa died. He sat up all night, that night, and he assisted us in all our arrangements. And he came in afterward, every evening. If papa had been there, there would have been a fine scene over it; he would have had to take the door, very likely. But now there was no one to make objections. And so when, as I say, we were at the four corners for the necessities of life, he asked Clementine's permission to ask me to marry him.

"I give you my word, Louise, I had forgotten there was such a thing as marriage in the world for me! I had forgotten it as completely as the chronology of the Merovingian dynasty, alas! with all the other school things forgotten. And I do not believe Clementine remembered there was such a possibility in the world for me. *_Mon Dieu!* when a girl is poor she may have all the beauty in the world--not that I had beauty, only a little prettiness. But you should have seen Clementine! She screamed for joy when she told me. Oh, there was but one answer according to her, and according to everybody she could consult, in her haste. They all said it was a dispensation of Providence in my favor. He was young, he was strong; he did not make a fortune, it was true, but he made a good living. And what an assistance to have a man in the family!--an assistance for Clementine and the children. But the principal thing, after all, was, he wanted to marry me. Nobody had ever wanted that before, my dear!

"Quick, quick, it was all arranged. All my friends did something for me. One made my *_peignoirs_* for me, one this, one that--*_ma foi!* I did not recognize myself. One made all the toilet of the bureau, another of the bed, and we all sewed on the wedding-dress together. And you should have seen Clementine, going out in all her great mourning, looking for a house, looking for a servant! But the wedding was private on account of poor papa. But you know, Loulou, I had never time to think, except about Clementine and the children, and when I thought of all those poor little children, poor papa's children, I said 'Quick, quick,' like the rest.

"It was the next day, the morning after the wedding, I had time to think. I was sitting here, just as you see me now, in my pretty new *_negligée_*. I had been looking at all the pretty presents I have shown you, and my trousseau, and my furniture,--it is not bad, as you see,--my dress, my veil, my ring, and--I do not know--I do not know--but, all of a sudden, from everywhere came the thought of my *_brun_*, my handsome *_brun_* with the mustache, and the *_bonne aventure_*, *_ricke_*, *_avenant_*, the Jules, Raoul, Guy, and the flower leaves, and '*_il m'aime, un pen, beaucoup, pas du tout, passionnément_*, and the way I expected to meet him walking to and from school, walking as if I were dancing the steps, and oh, my plans, my plans, my plans,--silk dresses, theater, voyages to Europe,--and poor papa, so fine, so tall, so aristocratic. I cannot tell you how it all came; it seized my heart, and, *_mon Dieu!* I cried out, and I wept, I wept, I wept. How

I wept! It pains me here now to remember it. Hours, hours it lasted, until I had no tears in my body, and I had to weep without them, with sobs and moans. But this, I have always observed, is the time for reflection--after the tears are all out. And I am sure God himself gave me my thoughts. 'Poor little Mimi!' I thought, '_fi done_! You are going to make a fool of yourself now when it is all over, because why? It is God who manages the world, and not you. You pray to God to help you in your despair, and he has helped you. He has sent you a good, kind husband who adores you; who asks only to be a brother to your sisters and brothers, and son to Clementine; who has given you more than you ever possessed in your life--but because he did not come out of the _bonne aventure_--and who gets a husband out of the _bonne aventure?_--and would your _brun_ have come to you in your misfortune?' I am sure God inspired those thoughts in me.

"I tell you, I rose from that bed--naturally I had thrown myself upon it. Quick I washed my face, I brushed my hair, and, you see these bows of ribbons,--look, here are the marks of the tears,--I turned them. _Hé,_ Loulou, it occurs to me, that if you examined the blue bows on a bride's _negligée_, you might always find tears on the other side; for do they not all have to marry whom God sends? and am I the only one who had dreams? It is the end of dreams, marriage; and that is the good thing about it. God lets us dream to keep us quiet, but he knows when to wake us up, I tell you. The blue bows knew! And now, you see, I prefer my husband to my _brun_ ; in fact, Loulou, I adore him, and I am furiously jealous about him. And he is so good to Clementine and the poor little children; and see his photograph--a blond, and not good-looking, and small!

"But poor papa! If he had been alive, I am sure he never would have agreed with God about my marriage."



MR. BLOKE'S ITEM

By Mark Twain

Written about 1865.

Project Gutenberg's *Masterpieces of Mystery In Four Volumes*, by Various

Our esteemed friend, Mr. John William Bloke, of Virginia City, walked into the office where we are sub-editor at a late hour last night, with an expression of profound and heartfelt suffering upon his countenance, and, sighing heavily, laid the following item reverently upon the desk, and walked slowly out again. He paused a moment at the door, and seemed struggling to command his feelings sufficiently to enable him to speak, and then, nodding his head toward his manuscript, ejaculated in a broken voice, "Friend of mine--oh! how sad!" and burst into tears. We

were so moved at his distress that we did not think to call him back and endeavour to comfort him until he was gone, and it was too late. The paper had already gone to press, but knowing that our friend would consider the publication of this item important, and cherishing the hope that to print it would afford a melancholy satisfaction to his sorrowing heart, we stopped the press at once and inserted it in our columns:

DISTRESSING ACCIDENT.--Last evening, about six o'clock, as Mr. William Schuyler, an old and respectable citizen of South Park, was leaving his residence to go downtown, as has been his usual custom for many years with the exception only of a short interval in the spring of 1850, during which he was confined to his bed by injuries received in attempting to stop a runaway horse by thoughtlessly placing himself directly in its wake and throwing up his hands and shouting, which if he had done so even a single moment sooner, must inevitably have frightened the animal still more instead of checking its speed, although disastrous enough to himself as it was, and rendered more melancholy and distressing by reason of the presence of his wife's mother, who was there and saw the sad occurrence notwithstanding it is at least likely, though not necessarily so, that she should be reconnoitering in another direction when incidents occur, not being vivacious and on the lookout, as a general thing, but even the reverse, as her own mother is said to have stated, who is no more, but died in the full hope of a glorious resurrection, upwards of three years ago, aged eighty-six, being a Christian woman and without guile, as it were, or property, in consequence of the fire of 1849, which destroyed every single thing she had in the world. But such is life. Let us all take warning by this solemn occurrence, and let us endeavour so to conduct ourselves that when we come to die we can do it. Let us place our hands upon our heart, and say with earnestness and sincerity that from this day forth, we will beware of the intoxicating bowl.--_First Edition of the Californian._

The head editor has been in here raising the mischief, and tearing his hair and kicking the furniture about, and abusing me like a pickpocket. He says that every time he leaves me in charge of the paper for half an hour I get imposed upon by the first infant or the first idiot that comes along. And he says that that distressing item of Mr. Bloke's is nothing but a lot of distressing bosh, and has no point to it, and no sense in it, and no information in it, and that there was no sort of necessity for stopping the press to publish it.

Now all this comes of being good-hearted. If I had been as unaccommodating and unsympathetic as some people, I would have told Mr. Bloke that I wouldn't receive his communication at such a late hour; but no, his snuffling distress touched my heart, and I jumped at the chance of doing something to modify his misery. I never read his item to see whether there was anything wrong about it, but hastily wrote the

few lines which preceded it, and sent it to the printers. And what has my kindness done for me? It has done nothing but bring down upon me a storm of abuse and ornamental blasphemy.

Now I will read that item myself, and see if there is any foundation for all this fuss. And if there is, the author of it shall hear from me.

* * * * *

I have read it, and I am bound to admit that it seems a little mixed at a first glance. However, I will peruse it once more.

I have read it again, and it does really seem a good deal more mixed than ever.

I have read it over five times, but if I can get at the meaning of it I wish I may get my just deserts. It won't bear analysis. There are things about it which I cannot understand at all. It don't say whatever became of William Schuyler. It just says enough about him to get one interested in his career, and then drops him. Who is William Schuyler, anyhow, and what part of South Park did he live in, and if he started down-town at six o'clock, did he ever get there, and if he did, did anything happen to him? Is he the individual that met with the "distressing accident?" Considering the elaborate circumstantiality of detail observable in the item, it seems to me that it ought to contain more information than it does. On the contrary, it is obscure--and not only obscure, but utterly incomprehensible. Was the breaking of Mr. Schuyler's leg, fifteen years ago, the "distressing accident" that plunged Mr. Bloke into unspeakable grief, and caused him to come up here at dead of night and stop our press to acquaint the world with the circumstance? Or did the "distressing accident" consist in the destruction of Schuyler's mother-in-law's property in early times? Or did it consist in the death of that person herself three years ago (albeit it does not appear that she died by accident)? In a word, what did that "distressing accident" consist in? What did that driveling ass of a Schuyler stand in the wake of a runaway horse for, with his shouting and gesticulating, if he wanted to stop him? And how the mischief could he get run over by a horse that had already passed beyond him? And what are we to take "warning" by? And how is this extraordinary chapter of incomprehensibilities going to be a "lesson" to us? And, above all, what has the intoxicating "bowl" got to do with it, anyhow? It is not stated that Schuyler drank, or that his wife drank, or that his mother-in-law drank, or that the horse drank--wherefore, then, the reference to the intoxicing bowl? It does seem to me that if Mr. Bloke had let the intoxicating bowl alone himself, he never would get into so much trouble about this exasperating imaginary accident. I have read this absurd item over and over again, with all its insinuating plausibility, until my head swims; but I can make neither head nor tail of it. There certainly seems to have been an accident of

some kind or other, but it is impossible to determine what the nature of it was, or who was the sufferer by it. I do not like to do it, but I feel compelled to request that the next time anything happens to one of Mr. Bloke's friends, he will append such explanatory notes to his account of it as will enable me to find out what sort of an accident it was and to whom it happened. I had rather all his friends should die than that I should be driven to the verge of lunacy again in trying to cipher out the meaning of another such production as the above.



SUN DRIED

The Project Gutenberg EBook of *Buttered Side Down*, by Edna Ferber

There come those times in the life of every woman when she feels that she must wash her hair at once. And then she does it. The feeling may come upon her suddenly, without warning, at any hour of the day or night; or its approach may be slow and insidious, so that the victim does not at first realize what it is that fills her with that sensation of unrest. But once in the clutches of the idea she knows no happiness, no peace, until she has donned a kimono, gathered up two bath towels, a spray, and the green soap, and she breathes again only when, head dripping, she makes for the back yard, the sitting-room radiator, or the side porch (depending on her place of residence, and the time of year).

Mary Louise was seized with the feeling at ten o'clock on a joyous June morning. She tried to fight it off because she had got to that stage in the construction of her story where her hero was beginning to talk and act a little more like a real live man, and a little less like a clothing store dummy. (By the way, they don't seem to be using those pink-and-white, black-mustachioed figures any more. Another good simile gone.)

Mary Louise had been battling with that hero for a week. He wouldn't make love to the heroine. In vain had Mary Louise striven to instill red blood into his watery veins. He and the beauteous heroine were as far apart as they had been on Page One of the typewritten manuscript. Mary Louise was developing nerves over him. She had bitten her finger nails, and twisted her hair into corkscrews over him. She had risen every morning at the chaste hour of seven, breakfasted hurriedly, tidied the tiny two-room apartment, and sat down in the unromantic morning light to wrestle with her stick of a hero. She had made her heroine a creature of grace, wit, and loveliness, but thus far the hero had not once clasped

her to him fiercely, or pressed his lips to her hair, her eyes, her cheeks. Nay (as the story-writers would put it), he hadn't even devoured her with his gaze.

This morning, however, he had begun to show some signs of life. He was developing possibilities. Whereupon, at this critical stage in the story-writing game, the hair-washing mania seized Mary Louise. She tried to dismiss the idea. She pushed it out of her mind, and slammed the door. It only popped in again. Her fingers wandered to her hair. Her eyes wandered to the June sunshine outside. The hero was left poised, arms outstretched, and unquenchable love-light burning in his eyes, while Mary Louise mused, thus:

"It certainly feels sticky. It's been six weeks, at least. And I could sit here-by the window--in the sun--and dry it----"

With a jerk she brought her straying fingers away from her hair, and her wandering eyes away from the sunshine, and her runaway thoughts back to the typewritten page. For three minutes the snap of the little disks crackled through the stillness of the tiny apartment. Then, suddenly, as though succumbing to an irresistible force, Mary Louise rose, walked across the room (a matter of six steps), removing hairpins as she went, and shoved aside the screen which hid the stationary wash-bowl by day.

Mary Louise turned on a faucet and held her finger under it, while an agonized expression of doubt and suspense overspread her features. Slowly the look of suspense gave way to a smile of beatific content. A sigh--deep, soul-filling, satisfied--welled up from Mary Louise's breast. The water was hot.

Half an hour later, head swathed turban fashion in a towel, Mary Louise strolled over to the window. Then she stopped, aghast. In that half hour the sun had slipped just around the corner, and was now beating brightly and uselessly against the brick wall a few inches away. Slowly Mary Louise unwound the towel, bent double in the contortionistic attitude that women assume on such occasions, and watched with melancholy eyes while the drops trickled down to the ends of her hair, and fell, unsunned, to the floor.

"If only," thought Mary Louise, bitterly, "there was such a thing as a back yard in this city--a back yard where I could squat on the grass, in the sunshine and the breeze---- Maybe there is. I'll ask the janitor."

She bound her hair in the turban again, and opened the door. At the far end of the long, dim hallway Charlie, the janitor, was doing something to the floor with a mop and a great deal of sloppy water, whistling the while with a shrill abandon that had announced his presence to Mary Louise.

"Oh, Charlie!" called Mary Louise. "Charlee! Can you come here just a

minute?"

"You bet!" answered Charlie, with the accent on the you; and came.

"Charlie, is there a back yard, or something, where the sun is, you know--some nice, grassy place where I can sit, and dry my hair, and let the breezes blow it?"

"Back yard!" grinned Charlie. "I guess you're new to N' York, all right, with ground costin' a million or so a foot. Not much they ain't no back yard, unless you'd give that name to an ash-barrel, and a dump heap or so, and a crop of tin cans. I wouldn't invite a goat to set in it."

Disappointment curved Mary Louise's mouth. It was a lovely enough mouth at any time, but when it curved in disappointment--ell, janitors are but human, after all.

"Tell you what, though," said Charlie. "I'll let you up on the roof. It ain't long on grassy spots up there, but say, breeze! Like a summer resort. On a clear day you can see way over 's far 's Eight' Avenoo. Only for the love of Mike don't blab it to the other women folks in the buildin', or I'll have the whole works of 'em usin' the roof for a general sun, massage, an' beauty parlor. Come on."

"I'll never breathe it to a soul," promised Mary Louise, solemnly. "Oh, wait a minute."

She turned back into her room, appearing again in a moment with something green in her hand.

"What's that?" asked Charlie, suspiciously.

Mary Louise, speeding down the narrow hallway after Charlie, blushed a little. "It--it's parsley," she faltered.

"Parsley!" exploded Charlie. "Well, what the----"

"Well, you see. I'm from the country," explained Mary Louise, "and in the country, at this time of year, when you dry your hair in the back yard, you get the most wonderful scent of green and growing things--not only of flowers, you know, but of the new things just coming up in the vegetable garden, and--and--well, this parsley happens to be the only really gardeny thing I have, so I thought I'd bring it along and sniff it once in a while, and make believe it's the country, up there on the roof."

Half-way up the perilous little flight of stairs that led to the roof, Charlie, the janitor, turned to gaze down at Mary Louise, who was just behind, and keeping fearfully out of the way of Charlie's heels.

"Wimmin," observed Charlie, the janitor, "is nothin' but little girls in

long skirts, and their hair done up."

"I know it," giggled Mary Louise, and sprang up on the roof, looking, with her towel-swathed head, like a lady Aladdin leaping from her underground grotto.

The two stood there a moment, looking up at the blue sky, and all about at the June sunshine.

"If you go up high enough," observed Mary Louise, "the sunshine is almost the same as it is in the country, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Charlie, "though Calvary cemetery is about as near's I'll ever get to the country. Say, you can set here on this soap box and let your feet hang down. The last janitor's wife used to hang her washin' up here, I guess. I'll leave this door open, see?"

"You're so kind," smiled Mary Louise.

"Kin you blame me?" retorted the gallant Charles. And vanished.

Mary Louise, perched on the soap box, unwound her turban, draped the damp towel over her shoulders, and shook out the wet masses of her hair. Now the average girl shaking out the wet masses of her hair looks like a drowned rat. But Nature had been kind to Mary Louise. She had given her hair that curled in little ringlets when wet, and that waved in all the right places when dry.

Just now it hung in damp, shining strands on either side of her face, so that she looked most remarkably like one of those oval-faced, great-eyed, red-lipped women that the old Italian artists were so fond of painting.

Below her, blazing in the sun, lay the great stone and iron city. Mary Louise shook out her hair idly, with one hand, sniffed her parsley, shut her eyes, threw back her head, and began to sing, beating time with her heel against the soap box, and forgetting all about the letter that had come that morning, stating that it was not from any lack of merit, etc. She sang, and sniffed her parsley, and waggled her hair in the breeze, and beat time, idly, with the heel of her little boot, when----

"Holy Cats!" exclaimed a man's voice. "What is this, anyway? A Coney Island concession gone wrong?"

Mary Louise's eyes unclosed in a flash, and Mary Louise gazed upon an irate-looking, youngish man, who wore shabby slippers, and no collar with a full dress air.

"I presume that you are the janitor's beautiful daughter," growled the collarless man.

"Well, not precisely," answered Mary Louise, sweetly. "Are you the scrub-lady's stalwart son?"

"Ha!" exploded the man. "But then, all women look alike with their hair down. I ask your pardon, though."

"Not at all," replied Mary Louise. "For that matter, all men look like picked chickens with their collars off."

At that the collarless man, who until now had been standing on the top step that led up to the roof, came slowly forward, stepped languidly over a skylight or two, draped his handkerchief over a convenient chimney and sat down, hugging his long, lean legs to him.

"Nice up here, isn't it?" he remarked.

"It was," said Mary Louise.

"Ha!" exploded he, again. Then, "Where's your mirror?" he demanded.

"Mirror?" echoed Mary Louise.

"Certainly. You have the hair, the comb, the attitude, and the general Lorelei effect. Also your singing lured me to your shores."

"You didn't look lured," retorted Mary Louise. "You looked lurid."

"What's that stuff in your hand?" next demanded he. He really was a most astonishingly rude young man.

"Parsley."

"Parsley!" shouted he, much as Charlie had done. "Well, what the----"

"Back home," elucidated Mary Louise once more, patiently, "after you've washed your hair you dry it in the back yard, sitting on the grass, in the sunshine and the breeze. And the garden smells come to you--the nasturtiums, and the pansies, and the geraniums, you know, and even that clean grass smell, and the pungent vegetable odor, and there are ants, and bees, and butterflies----"

"Go on," urged the young man, eagerly.

"And Mrs. Next Door comes out to hang up a few stockings, and a jabot or so, and a couple of baby dresses that she has just rubbed through, and she calls out to you:

"'Washed your hair?'

"'Yes,' you say. 'It was something awful, and I wanted it nice for

Tuesday night. But I suppose I won't be able to do a thing with it.'

"And then Mrs. Next Door stands there a minute on the clothes-reel platform, with the wind whipping her skirts about her, and the fresh smell of the growing things coming to her. And suddenly she says: 'I guess I'll wash mine too, while the baby's asleep.'"

The collarless young man rose from his chimney, picked up his handkerchief, and moved to the chimney just next to Mary Louise's soap box.

"Live here?" he asked, in his impolite way.

"If I did not, do you think that I would choose this as the one spot in all New York in which to dry my hair?"

"When I said, 'Live here,' I didn't mean just that. I meant who are you, and why are you here, and where do you come from, and do you sign your real name to your stuff, or use a nom de plume?"

"Why--how did you know?" gasped Mary Louise.

"Give me five minutes more," grinned the keen-eyed young man, "and I'll tell you what make your typewriter is, and where the last rejection slip came from."

"Oh!" said Mary Louise again. "Then you are the scrub-lady's stalwart son, and you've been ransacking my waste-basket."

Quite unheeding, the collarless man went on, "And so you thought you could write, and you came on to New York (you know one doesn't just travel to New York, or ride to it, or come to it; one 'comes on' to New York), and now you're not so sure about the writing, h'm? And back home what did you do?"

"Back home I taught school--and hated it. But I kept on teaching until I'd saved five hundred dollars. Every other school ma'am in the world teaches until she has saved five hundred dollars, and then she packs two suit-cases, and goes to Europe from June until September. But I saved my five hundred for New York. I've been here six months now, and the five hundred has shrunk to almost nothing, and if I don't break into the magazines pretty soon----"

"Then?"

"Then," said Mary Louise, with a quaver in her voice, "I'll have to go back and teach thirty-seven young devils that six times five is thirty, put down the naught and carry six, and that the French are a gay people, fond of dancing and light wines. But I'll scrimp on everything from hairpins to shoes, and back again, including pretty collars, and gloves,

and hats, until I've saved up another five hundred, and then I'll try it all over again, because I--can--write."

From the depths of one capacious pocket the inquiring man took a small black pipe, from another a bag of tobacco, from another a match. The long, deft fingers made a brief task of it.

"I didn't ask you," he said, after the first puff, "because I could see that you weren't the fool kind that objects." Then, with amazing suddenness, "Know any of the editors?"

"Know them!" cried Mary Louise. "Know them! If camping on their doorsteps, and haunting the office buildings, and cajoling, and fighting with secretaries and office boys, and assistants and things constitutes knowing them, then we're chums."

"What makes you think you can write?" sneered the thin man.

Mary Louise gathered up her brush, and comb, and towel, and parsley, and jumped off the soap box. She pointed belligerently at her tormentor with the hand that held the brush.

"Being the scrub-lady's stalwart son, you wouldn't understand. But I can write. I sha'n't go under. I'm going to make this town count me in as the four million and oneth. Sometimes I get so tired of being nobody at all, with not even enough cleverness in me to wrest a living from this big city, that I long to stand out at the edge of the curbing, and take off my hat, and wave it, and shout, 'Say, you four million uncaring people, I'm Mary Louise Moss, from Escanaba, Michigan, and I like your town, and I want to stay here. Won't you please pay some slight attention to me. No one knows I'm here except myself, and the rent collector.'"

"And I," put in the rude young man.

"O, you," sneered Mary Louise, equally rude, "you don't count."

The collarless young man in the shabby slippers smiled a curious little twisted smile. "You never can tell," he grinned, "I might." Then, quite suddenly, he stood up, knocked the ash out of his pipe, and came over to Mary Louise, who was preparing to descend the steep little flight of stairs.

"Look here, Mary Louise Moss, from Escanaba, Michigan, you stop trying to write the slop you're writing now. Stop it. Drop the love tales that are like the stuff that everybody else writes. Stop trying to write about New York. You don't know anything about it. Listen. You get back to work, and write about Mrs. Next Door, and the hair-washing, and the vegetable garden, and bees, and the back yard, understand? You write the way you talked to me, and then you send your stuff in to Cecil Reeves."

"Reeves!" mocked Mary Louise. "Cecil Reeves, of The Earth? He wouldn't dream of looking at my stuff. And anyway, it really isn't your affair." And began to descend the stairs.

"Well, you know you brought me up here, kicking with your heels, and singing at the top of your voice. I couldn't work. So it's really your fault." Then, just as Mary Louise had almost disappeared down the stairway he put his last astonishing question.

"How often do you wash your hair?" he demanded.

"Well, back home," confessed Mary Louise, "every six weeks or so was enough, but----"

"Not here," put in the rude young man, briskly. "Never. That's all very well for the country, but it won't do in the city. Once a week, at least, and on the roof. Cleanliness demands it."

"But if I'm going back to the country," replied Mary Louise, "it won't be necessary."

"But you're not," calmly said the collarless young man, just as Mary Louise vanished from sight.

Down at the other end of the hallway on Mary Louise's floor Charlie, the janitor, was doing something to the windows now, with a rag, and a pail of water.

"Get it dry?" he called out, sociably.

"Yes, thank you," answered Mary Louise, and turned to enter her own little apartment. Then, hesitatingly, she came back to Charlie's window.

"There--there was a man up there--a very tall, very thin, very rude, very--that is, rather nice youngish oldish man, in slippers, and no collar. I wonder----"

"Oh, him!" snorted Charlie. "He don't show himself onct in a blue moon. None of the other tenants knows he's up there. Has the whole top floor to himself, and shuts himself up there for weeks at a time, writin' books, or some such truck. That guy, he owns the building."

"Owns the building!" said Mary Louise, faintly. "Why he looked--he looked----"

"Sure," grinned Charlie. "That's him. Name's Reeves--Cecil Reeves. Say, ain't that a divil of a name



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